FOUR DAYS IN MAY

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DAY ONE. 6 MAY 1968

Lying face up in a drainage ditch during a firefight in a South Vietnamese military cemetery was hardly the place to experience an epiphany, or to start a rip snorting war story. Possibly, but it's my war story and I'll tell it any damn way I please. It wasn't like I had anything better to do. Unlike my partner, photographer SFC Harry Breedlove, who had to expose himself to enemy fire in order to take pictures, all I had to do was lay on my back and let the tape recorder I had been issued capture the sounds around me.

So the most pressing problem I had at that moment was trying to light a cigarette with sweaty hands that both shook the match I was holding and soaked the paper, thereby putting out my smoke before I could even light it. Smoking may be bad for your health but at that moment there were more immediate ways of dying and all I wanted was the reassuring boost of nicotine filling my lungs. The sounds of the battle echoed off the walls that surrounded the cemetery, Smoke drifted across the battlefield and a siren from nearby Tan Son Nhut Airbase wailed in concert with the staccato of automatic weapons firing and the boom of grenades exploding somewhere in front of me. This reality really sucked, but I had learned that over a year before when I walked into my first night of hell in basic training. May of 1968 was a hell of a lot different from January 1967 when my military "career" had begun.

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"Born on a mountain top, raised by a poppa bear."
"Mouth full of jaw teeth. Rump full of hair."
"Cast-iron stomach. Blue-steel rod."
"We're bad by God. We're Charlie, by God."

Official War Chant for C. Company,
5th Battalion, 2nd Training Brigade
Fort Benning Georgia. January 1967.

It was the middle of the night when our Greyhound Bus full of dead tired raw recruits pulled in front of the Army basic training reception center at Fort Benning Georgia. It had been a long, boring trip from Jacksonville Florida, where we had all been sworn in to the Army earlier that day. That boredom came to an abrupt halt when the bus door swung open and we were immediately surrounded by a group of drill sergeants screaming at us to get our sorry asses out of the bus and in to a military formation. The humid Georgia cold cut through our bodies as our group struggled to follow orders.

Bam! Welcome to the United States Army you fucking sheep!

We stood at attention, shivering from the cold and our new found fear of drill sergeants. They herded us into a single story wooden building that probably dated from World War Two, and handed us over to a tall, black, and very skinny Specialist Fourth Class who let this room full of sleep deprived guys know that at that moment our asses belonged to him and the United States Army.

It was his show and he let us know he was in charge. Before that night was over I learned that fuck could be used as a verb, adverb, noun, adjective, pronoun and other conjugations I don't know the names of. When he added the word mother to the mix his performance was elevated to what may have been the Poet Laureate of Profanity at Fort Benning. He was in charge of our filling out some basic paperwork for entering the base. One little 3x5 card was my favorite. On one side it said, "Dear blank, your son blank arrived at the Fort Benning Reception Center on blank. He will be contacting you in a few days. Now filling in the blank parts of the card was not something you were allowed to freelance your way through. You had to do each blank when he told you to do it and not a moment sooner. Doing the address on the flip side was even more interesting. You did it one line at a time. He would tell you where to put your name. address, town, state and zip code. One guy's home address was in an apartment. This threw a monkey wrench into the specialist's routine. He wasn't programmed to answer where to put the apartment number. I felt like a retard getting instructions from an idiot. This process seemed to go on forever. We all just wanted to get this over with and get some sleep. It was at this point I learned to never, ever, volunteer anything about yourself except what was asked of you by the questions on the form you were filling out. Raising my hand with the group who admitted they had been to college cost me and the other "college boys" in the group what little sleep we might have gotten that night as the skinny specialist laughingly had us wash and wax the floor in that room while the other, less educated in our group went off to bed. Lying in the bottom of a drainage ditch during a firefight was better than that.

You think I'm kidding you? Let me explain.

During my first few days in the military I went through many of the classic eight steps of grief. My personal favorite step was getting through denial. I kept thinking that this was not going to actually happen to me. Somebody would show up with some forgotten records saying that Private Grigsby was not supposed to be here. I was all a mistake. Like admitting to yourself that eventually you are going to die someday. You know how we all as individuals believe that somehow we are exempt.

General in Charge of Fort Benning, "Mr Grigsby, please forgive us. This has been a terrible mistake."

Me, "No problem general. Could you have a staff car come around and drive me home."

It was a few days later, after that first night at the reception center and after our group had been assigned to a training area with the unlikely name of Harmony Church, that it hit me that I was not exempt from this shit. I stepped into the boiler room of the 4th platoon barracks to get out of the freezing cold and have a cigarette. The full weight of what was going to be my life for the next three years came down on me and it was just starting. At that moment, alone in the smoky darkness of that boiler room, I broke down and cried. It only lasted for a moment, but it was the most depressing moment of my then young life.

I had reached the stage of acceptance.

This situation was real, very real. I was 23-years old and trapped in this surreal world with a bunch of teeny boppers from shit-hole little towns in rural Alabama, Mississippi and Georgia.

For the next two months, as I endured the mental and physical horrors of basic training, every night I dreamed about being back in college. I relived the pleasures of playing rock and roll, drinking beer, and having the time of my life. Remember how it feels when you wake up from a bad dream and as you become conscious of reality you recognize it was only a nightmare. Remember how good that felt?

Every morning, for sixty straight days I would be jolted awake from my sweet dreams of civilian life. Those dreams would be ripped out of my nocturnal consciousness by some asshole sergeant who would stride into our barracks banging on a garbage can lid, screaming at the top of his lungs for all of us girls to get our sorry asses out of our bunks and line up for formation in ten minutes. You get it? I woke up into a fucking nightmare everyday, not the other way around. Somehow that drainage ditch didn't seem as bad. Mind you I was still scared shitless, but to some small extent my ass belonged to me, not the US Army.

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This day hadn't started off as an oppressively hot and humid day, no indeed. It started off as an oppressively hot and humid night. I should know. I was awake, pulling guard duty in the middle of that night, crouched on the roof of the three-story villa our U.S. Army photo team called home. It wasn't like we didn't know something was going to happen. Rumors of a Viet Cong-North Vietnamese attack on the city of Saigon had been circulating all week.

The day before, the officer in charge of our photo team had excitedly come back from the daily afternoon military briefing at Tan Son Nhut Airbase with the straight skinny. The shit was definitely going to hit the fan tomorrow, he said. His enthusiasm about what tomorrow might hold was tempered by the fears of the team's enlisted men, who would have to go out and cover that shit.

Later that night, our lieutenant's excitement over covering combat was on my mind as I pulled guard duty and watched flares float slowly down over the city and around our neighborhood. The flares descended by parachute from World War Two vintage C-47 cargo aircraft that circled the city overhead. The harsh yellow light they cast caused shadows to slither and jump over and around the buildings and streets nearby. It was easy to dredge up phantoms from the primal depths of my imagination. Hordes of little slant-eyed mother fuckers in short pants were scurrying around our villa like rats in the dark, looking for ways to break in and kill us all. I crawled up on the top deck of our building where I had an uncluttered view of the western part of the city known as Cholon. Out there I could see colored tracer rounds from Huey helicopter gun ships arch gracefully down towards the ground as they fired on enemy positions on the outskirts of the city. Watching this I knew that when daylight came Photo Team Charlie was in for a very long day. Despite the humid heat I shivered.

At breakfast we had to fend for ourselves. Our Vietnamese maids didn't show up for work. It was not a good time to let the bad guys see that you worked for the Americans. As we drank our coffee and nursed our burgeoning paranoia, Armed Forces Vietnam Network radio talked about everything except the combat that was going on in and around the city.

However, somebody must have left a studio door open because as the G.I announcer droned on about baseball scores back home in The States we could hear automatic weapons fire in the background. I guess the enlisted men running the operation knew there was more than one way to get the story out over the air.

Our lieutenant was beside himself with excitement. The war was being fought in our backyard and now was the time to get some real fine combat footage. This was the Big Story of the war right now and we were going to get a piece of it. Our officer in charge had this way of talking to enlisted men that could be both bitingly sarcastic and menacing. His tone and accent had a strange resemblance to the voice patterns of the 1930's comic actor W.C. Fields. In fact, he was a big fan of Fields and it was rumored he even had a large poster of Fields hanging in his quarters behind his bed. A former enlisted man, he never let you forget that he was your superior officer. He liked to say that he became an officer because he hated sergeants. He was the kind of Ugly American who thought the Vietnamese were inferior because they hadn't learned our language. He seemed to believe that if you shouted English at them loud enough they would somehow understand you. The chain of command in the military is very clear on this, and so for all intensive purposes, this guy owned our collective asses. In his defense, the military is made up of one long descending hierarchy of "ass ownership." Even he had people above him who could order him around as well. But that was not going to help our dilemma right now since he was the biggest rat in the room.

Harry Breedlove and I, along with SP4 Ed Hawes would drive to the French Cemetery where it was reported there was heavy contact between South Vietnamese and enemy forces. Harry would shoot stills, Ed would shoot motion picture and I would record sound. We gathered up our photo gear, weapons, flak jackets, steel pots, and headed out the door. Today's commute to the war zone was a mere fifteen minute ride by jeep.

Once out on the street we found things to be strangely quiet for this time of day. Usually the streets were jammed with traffic and the sidewalks crowded with people doing business. Now it was empty except for military traffic and the occasional taxi. We had driven by this cemetery many times and of course had given it no notice. Now it was about to be the center of our universe.

A few minutes later, we pulled up next to the security gate in front of the compound of the Saigon bureau of the Pacific Stars and Stripes newspaper. Newsmen, cameramen and other journalistic hangers-on were gathered outside. They all seemed to be taking a breather from what was going on down the street. From there we walked the last couple of blocks to the back wall of the cemetery. Harry decided that Ed Hawes would go up to the top of an adjacent building that would afford an overall view of the battlefield, then he would join us in the cemetery.

Now it's obvious that fighting a battle inside a cemetery is probably the height of irony, but fact was, nobody was laughing. Peering over the wall we could see South Vietnamese troops moving towards the opposite end of the cemetery. Others appeared to be hunkered down behind tombstones and down in the maze of drainage ditches that crisscrossed between the stones. A high, wire fence separated the Airbase perimeter from the cemetery wall. Next to us, on the other side of the fence was an American tank. Harry and I followed a couple of South Vietnamese soldiers as they scrambled over the cemetery wall to join their comrades. So far so good, I thought, everything is under control. I knew that Harry had seen a lot combat and knew what he was doing. When he would hear the younger photographers telling war stories over beers he would often ask if they had pictures of what they were talking about. If they didn't he would advise them to "not put it in their captions." He had this dry, country boy wit that went well with his West Virginia accent.

I pulled the little M-1 carbine I was carrying up tighter under my left arm. The tape recorder I was carrying weighted down my other side. On my web belt I carried a holstered .45 automatic and two canteens of water. We had only been gone from the villa for half an hour and my mouth was already feeling dry as a camel's butt.

We moved carefully from tombstone to tombstone towards the center of the cemetery. Off to our right we could see a Vietnamese trooper carrying a wounded buddy on his back. He ran along the wall as incoming rounds were kicking up dust behind and ahead of him. Seeing we were also within rifle range, Harry and I headed for the nearest ditch. From this vantage point we could see that most of the action was going on ahead of us. Government forces were set up in defensive positions near the center of the cemetery and were firing into the buildings that lined the back wall. Or so we thought. As we started to move forward again, more rounds came our way. Again we scrambled to find cover. Lying there I could see the air force barracks buildings inside the perimeter of Tan Son Nhut Airbase. On one barracks roof sat two off duty Air Force types. They were dressed in t-shirts and shorts, drinking beer, and apparently watching the fight as some kind of spectator sport. Now here was something they could write home about.

"Fucking Airdales," I snorted.

After awhile the firing died down and we both became tired of laying there frying in the blistering sun. So by mutual agreement, we dredged up our courage, gear and ourselves and again started walking towards the center of the cemetery. In war, as in life, action is relative and by this time the enemy forces had seemingly withdrawn from their fighting positions along the back of the cemetery. There was nothing much to photograph at this point but the troops in place, the wounded and the dead. Several enemy soldiers lay in a ditch. Harry made pictures while I smoked that long delayed cigarette.

An American advisor with the South Vietnamese forces told us that the action was far from over, but had merely moved to another neighborhood. We made notes about the composition of the opposing force. We looked around and decided that for now we had seen enough. The day was still young, so we decided to head back to the villa, refit, regroup and plan where to go next. I was delighted with the going back to the villa part, but not with the "where to go next" part. My adrenalin level had all ready spiked, and now I felt hung over and exhausted.

It was at this point that we both realized that Ed Hawes was nowhere to be found. He had not followed the plan and joined us in the cemetery. We retraced our steps back to the Stars and Stripes office where our jeep was parked. There we found both our jeep and Ed Hawes standing next to it. He explained that he had passed out from the heat while on the roof of the building trying to shoot aerials of the cemetery below. When he couldn't see us in the cemetery he elected to return to the jeep. Personally I didn't blame Ed. I wouldn't have gone into that cemetery if I hadn't been with Harry Breedlove. For a while it had been some pretty scary shit down there. Harry didn't make any comment about Ed's story. Within a few minutes we were pulling through the main gate of the villa. I was glad I wasn't in Ed's shoes.

The lieutenant was livid when he heard about Hawes and his story. Fortunately for Ed the war was still going hot and heavy, just around the corner and during our absence "The Boss" had gathered all kinds of intelligence about where the fighting was going on, thereby delaying his wrath for a while. We grabbed a quick lunch, refilled our canteens and gathered our photo gear. This time out I would shoot stills and Harry would shoot motion picture footage. Going back out was bad enough, but then we found out that the lieutenant was going to lead us. My heart sank.

My theory was that he saw himself as a reincarnation of the late General George Patton, or he maybe was making his own personal Vietnam War movie inside his head. This was his chance for military glory and medals. Good God. Harry and I were going to be extras in his movie..

We headed back towards the cemetery, stopping once again at the Stars and Stripes compound to park the jeep. The lieutenant was beside himself with excitement, his chubby cheeks were actually quivering. We started down the road towards what was obviously more fighting. Al Chang, a long-time photographer with the Associated Press came walking towards us

"I've had enough," he announced.

"Me too," I thought to myself, "and we are just getting started."

One photographer with United Press International had been killed in this fight and a photographer from Life magazine has been wounded. That just seemed to excite the lieutenant even more. The fighting was no longer just inside the cemetery. It had spread to the neighboring homes and streets. The three of us found shelter next to the part of the cemetery wall that ran parallel to nearby Plantation Road. A government soldier lay propped up against the wall. He was wounded in the stomach and a buddy was keeping watch over him. I tried to make a picture but my hands were shaking. Around us men were moving around and firing over the wall into the cemetery. Military traffic was speeding by in both directions. I watched a flatbed truck go by and as I looked in disbelief I saw that it was filled with stiffened corpses, piled on top of each other like firewood. A medical vehicle with a red cross on the side pulled up and stopped right across from us. A group of Vietnamese medics got out and ran, crouching and crawling across the open ground between the road and the wall to the wounded government soldier I had photographed earlier.

They were too late. He was dead. They loaded him on a stretcher and ran back towards their vehicle. I shot another picture. I tried to make pictures along the wall of people firing into the cemetery. And so it went. The Boss was getting itchy to move on. There was not enough bang-bang here for him.

We followed him across the road and in to an adjacent neighborhood. Government soldiers had cornered a couple of enemy soldiers under a schoolhouse and had talked them in to giving up. Harry and I ran up to one group of soldiers that was guarding one of the men. He looked like a kid. Someone had given him a piece of fruit and he looked up at his captors with questioning, deer-like eyes. Further down the building the other captured soldier was bringing out their gear from under the house. He looked older and more hard-core. The South Vietnamese soldiers who were guarding him saw our cameras and one pudgy soldier made him pose for a picture with him. The captured V.C. looked glad to be out of the fighting. His chances of survival were probably better if he had kept on fighting. Funny, our chances of survival might not have been better if they had stayed in place and not given up. For some time prior to their capture, these two guys had a perfect line of fire on everyone who had been hunkered down behind the cemetery wall.

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Danger is relative and when we went out on assignments we didn't always know what we were getting into. Like being handed a assignment to shoot signal equipment at a small base near the Cambodian border. It sounded pretty tame. Carl Hansen and I caught a flight from 8th Aerial Port at Tan Son Nhut on a C123 to the large base camp at Lai Khe. Here we set up the shoot with the local Public Information Office. Carl would shoot mopic and I would shoot stills. The PIO officer assigned a young 2nd Lieutenant named Bill Geist to accompany us.

That night Carl and I watched tracer rounds from circling helicopters light up the perimeter of the base. Fortunately the night was quiet with no incoming rounds. We left for the signal site at Quan Loi early the next morning.

Our flight landed on a sunny airstrip next to a large rubber plantation. As the three of us walked towards the signal company we were to photograph, a mortar round came crashing into the trees. We all looked at each other. Its broad daylight and these people get hit in the middle of the morning? Fortunately that was the only shot fired and we soon found our way to the compound of B Company , 121st Signal Battalion. Just some tactical radio stuff in vans, no big deal, a quick shoot then we are outta there.

The rubber trees kept the place wet and dank. Tents were covered with mold. The ground was a soggy slush of red clay. The signal guys had constructed wooden walkways to keep you out of the mud. If you had to stray from the walkways your boots became covered in a heavy wad of muck that made your feet feel like they weighed ten pounds each. If there was ever a place where everyone there should have been prescribed anti-depressants this was the place.

Carl and I shot the assignment and we were done by mid-afternoon. We headed out to the landing strip to catch a flight back to Lai Khe. This was not the kind of place we wanted to spend the night. Lieutenant Geist checked in with some Air Force guy who was in charge of assigning passengers and we then began our wait. Now waiting is something we had to do a lot at military airstrips all over Vietnam. Sometimes we caught a ride right away and other times we could be waiting for seven or eight hours before we caught a flight. Today looked like a long wait. Flights came and went and the Air Force guy didn't say a word. Then he started to close down his office for the night and at that point we learned that

he hadn't bothered to inform us of the flight to Lai Khe. We were stuck there for the night.

"Fucking Airdale," I thought.

The first sergeant at the 121st set us up with a place to stay. Mostly we just hung out and waited for the night to end. I was set up to sleep in the unused bunk of a guy who was on R and R. He had arranged a ring of waist high sandbags around his bunk so that it looked like a fort. I hung around with a couple of the men who shared the tent, drinking beer and talking. At midnight one of the guys happily announced that today was his 21st birthday. As I was shook hands with him a mortar round came crashing into the camp. I had gotten into the habit of scoping out safe havens from incoming where ever I went and earlier I had noticed a slit trench outside the tent. I wheeled out the door just as another round came crashing in. Son of a bitch, I thought. That was close. As I dove into the slit trench I could hear shrapnel slicing through the trees above me. That was an air burst, and that sandbagged fort of a bunk would not protect me from that. I asked my two hosts if there was a bunker nearby.

"Yeah," they answered. "The Lifers (military professionals) have built themselves a big one over by the headquarters hootch."

That sounded great to me and after a little searching I found what I considered the Taj Mahal of underground bunkers. It was as large as a small house, contained several dozen bunks, plus it had electric lights and a large fan blowing in fresh air from the outside. I felt like I was heaven. I found myself an empty bunk and was soon asleep. The next morning Lt. Geist, Carl and I reunited and got the hell out of there. Years later I would discover that Bill Geist went on to become a reporter for CBS News in New York.

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In combat, your awareness of time and space become distorted by the assault on your senses from a heightened state of fear, heat, sound and the adrenalin that is pumping double quick through your body. Time and space become compressed. Where we were and what we were doing at any given time was reduced to my own personal perimeter of fear. Moving through streets and neighborhoods that had been reduced to rubble, looking, listening, for clues as to what would happen next. Breathing the smoke from nearby burning buildings, hearing the sporadic pop of rifle fire and the crushing humidity pumped up my senses as we ran zig-zag between homes and shops along Plantation Road. Here and there we saw bodies lying in the street. At one point I ran into a small store to reload my camera and found a small group of Saigon soldiers looting the place. Showing them a big grin I slowly back out, flashing them a two finger peace sign as I retreated. I didn't figure it was a good idea to be showing up with a camera when looting was going on. They were probably just kids from the sticks who weren't paid shit by their own government and were excited over the baubles of the big city.

Once outside I stopped, leaned up against a wall and started to change the film in my camera. It was then that I noticed that at my feet was a dead enemy soldier. Looking down at him I could see that somebody had used his ear for an ashtray. The dead often get no respect in war, especially when they are on the other side. He was very young, and in death his skin made him look like he was made of wax. The dead could give off a powerful, almost physical aura to the living. They were now at that place we all fear to go. Now they were wiser than we were. Fortunately he hadn't been dead long enough to start to swell up and smell in the terrible heat, so he looked more like he was just asleep. I finished loading my film and moved on.

I should stop for a moment and explain to you that before I joined the army, I had never done anything serious with a camera before in my life. Back in Hawaii I was given some basic instructions on the camera and its operation by a crusty old sergeant named Jack Yamaguchi. He was an interesting guy. When he wasn't being a combat photographer in Vietnam, he was raising and dealing in rare orchids from all over the Pacific Rim. Sometimes he would smuggle new orchids into Hawaii. Jack didn't have much patience with my obvious visual ignorance and at the time I didn't blame him. I did learn however and it was the old fashioned way, through experience in the field.

By now Harry and the lieutenant were up at the next block where a group of South Vietnamese troops were firing down an alley. The lieutenant was busily engaged in trying to wrest a fully loaded rocket-propelled grenade launcher from the corpse of the enemy soldier who was still holding it. He wanted to take the thing back to the villa and hang it on the wall of our dining room as a souvenir. Harry looked at him in disbelief.

"Sir you can't take that back to the villa, it's too dangerous to keep. It could go off and kill us all" When The Boss started to argue, Harry then replied,

"Sir if you take that back with us I'm not coming with you." Somehow reason won out over his desire for a war trophy.

Behind us a .50 caliber machine gun mounted on top of a truck was firing in spurts. Individual soldiers were also firing their weapons. Having lost interest in the RPG launcher The Boss was now happily firing off bursts into nowhere with his M-16. The war had come back into focus. A nearby filling station had caught on fire. The sound and the fury of combat had returned to my consciousness. I moved away and started to frame a picture. Harry

was getting set to begin shooting again with his motion picture camera. It was then that I heard him yell out in pain.

"I've been hit!"

For a moment I froze. My "island" of fear had been punctured. This couldn't be happening. Not to us. My brief "reverie" was broken by the sound of the lieutenant yelling at me to get over and help Harry, who was now lying on his back in the middle of the street. My legs felt like rubber. Holy shit! This was not a movie. Harry was actually wounded. I ran over just in time to see the lieutenant start to cut away Harry's pants leg where a piece of shrapnel had entered his right upper thigh. I stopped and looked down.

"Take a picture," he ordered.

Funny, but that is not exactly what I would have thought to do at that particular moment. Then I thought. That crafty bastard is thinking ahead of us all. As a result of his crazy, daredevil actions, we were getting some great footage. I was making pictures far beyond my abilities as a novice photographer. On the down side of this, he could get us killed too. That was the problem. That was why I both feared and hated him.

A South Vietnamese medic came over and gave Harry first aid. After the medic was done we got Harry back to his feet, handed him his camera and started to head back down the street. We decided to call it a day and take Harry to the nearby Third Field Hospital where he could get further treatment. I looked over my shoulder to make sure we didn't have any unwanted company moving up behind us and then that was when I saw "It." This was no ordinary "It." For me, this "It" was an epiphany.

A Satori moment, perhaps.

Behind us the Shell filling station that had been burning the whole time we had been running around doing our thing had reached a kind of visual zenith. The sign was now on fire, surround by billowing black smoke and bright red flames. I yelled to the lieutenant and Breedlove.

"Jesus, look at that."

The "S" had burned away, leaving the word "hell" surround in smoke and flames. Harry framed it with his Arriflex 16mm motion picture camera, starting tight and then zooming back to a long shot of the entire street. Even today it's an incredibly dramatic sequence. At that moment in my evolving photographic career I knew this was something significant. Somehow this almost made being there worth it. We had witnessed and captured a visual metaphor of the thing that was war.

I retrieved the jeep and brought it back to where Harry and the lieutenant waited. I drove with Harry in the passenger seat and the lieutenant in the back As we sped back past the French Cemetery The Boss asked Harry if he should shoot at some people who we could see were moving through the cemetery.

"No sir Lieutenant," he answered. "They look like our side and if you shoot at them they'll shoot back at us."

The lieutenant seemed disappointed.

We drove Harry to the hospital where he could get additional treatment for his wound. I then drove us back to the villa. Safe at last, I shouted to myself. I made it home in one piece today. I was one more day closer to leaving here that I could check off on my calendar.

The villa was our home away from our home away from home. Let me explain this. The members of our photo team were all only temporary guests of The Republic of South Vietnam. We traveled to temporary destinations like South Vietnam, South Korea, and Thailand on three-month tours. We were like a band of gypsies traveling around the Pacific Rim.

Our home unit, Department of the Army Special Photo Office, also known by the acronym DASPO, was located at Fort Shafter Hawaii. When we weren't away on temporary duty, this was our home. Here were our records and where we received our pay. The married members of the unit had their families living there. While over time the various commanding officers of the unit thought they were in charge, the place was actually run by our very thoughtful and talented top NCO. First Sergeant Ken Bridgham. It was the power of his personality, vision and fair treatment of the troops that gave our unit its personality. Commanding officers came and went, but First Sergeant Bridgham there for the long haul. It was a delicate balance of personalities and power. There were other, less enlightened officers and non-commissioned officers in the unit who would have run things differently and with a lot less grace.

Back during the early days of the war, some pentagon-based Army general who was jealous of all the beautiful photography that was coming out of the war zone courtesy of the United States Air Force, commanded there should be an Army photo presence in-country as well. And that is why Daspo was born.

There were three full-time photo teams located overseas. Team Alpha in Korea, Team Bravo in Thailand, and Team Charlie in South Vietnam. When overseas we were paid per diem in addition to our regular army pay. In Saigon the rate was $26 per day, which seemed like big money in those days. It was this allowance that allowed our team to live outside the reach of the military chain of

command in Vietnam. We pretty much moved around and covered what we wanted unhindered.

Our vehicles were unaccounted for within the military chain of command and mostly illegal. Somewhere there was a motor pool sergeant who had a case of scotch or a brick of color film in his locker. We drew our rations from a civilian post exchange, and we paid our rent for the villa to a South Vietnamese general. Once a month his wife would roll into our driveway in a chauffer-driven black Citron limousine that resembled a 1930's gangster car. On one occasion I actually witnessed this almost formal ritual for paying our rent. Her uniformed driver got out and opened the back door of the limo. Out stepped this regal looking woman of a certain age wearing a dress that looked like it had been designed for a Chinese princess. She strode up to our front door, whereupon Paul Moulton, the ranking sergeant in charge of the team opened it and invited her in. She then sat down very formally in front of his desk and slowly began to count out a very large stack of Vietnamese currency. Once she was satisfied it was all there she rose, turned on her very tall high heels and returned to her car.

The villa was not only our home, but our office too. The first line of business after being on an assignment was to type our captions, then get the still, motion picture film and audio tape ready for shipment back to the Pentagon. On a normal working day, when the city wasn't under attack from within, dinner would be served by our maids at around six. Three Vietnamese women took care of the villa for us. We never knew their real names so we called the two younger ones who did the house cleaning and cooking Sam and Gus. The older woman who did the laundry we called Mamma-San. I don't know who originally hired them, but I'm sure he had made damn sure they were homely enough not to attract too much attention from a group of young, rowdy, and very horny American boys. However, it was not uncommon for one of these women to find themselves suddenly picked up, hugged and

laughingly twirled around the villa by one of the guys in a moment of youthful exuberance. They would endure this attack with a good natured admonishment in sing- song Vietnamese. Mamma-San did not tolerate that kind of attention...well not often at least. Since she did our laundry she also dispersed the goods, hopefully to the proper party. If she was pissed at you, then you might find yourself with a uniform that was two sizes too small. The lieutenant was so disrespectful to her that he was constantly complaining about getting the wrong laundry back.

Our evening cocktail hour started at six. Actually, calling it a cocktail hour is a little too polite. It was more like the evening Beer Swill, as we tried to release the private demons each of us had acquired during the day. After the dining room table was cleared a poker game often ensued. There was a small television set at one end of the room that gave us access to armed forces television, which was mostly reruns of old American shows. One popular show was a World War Two based series entitled Combat. We had all grown up on popular culture movies and television about that war. It had definitely colored the way we thought war was all about. The show Combat was much closer to the truth. I guess we were all comparing our seemingly endless war with the more popular one that our fathers and uncles had fought two decades before. Probably the most popular feature on armed forces television was the weather report given by a very comely young American girl. Thousands of young American boys across the Republic of South Vietnam would watch her prance around the set wearing a very revealing mini skirt. As we liked to say, she had legs up to her ass. It is amazing that the collective moans of frustrated sexual desire from soldiers, marines and airmen watching the show did not block out the sounds of combat all over the Republic of South Vietnam.

If your taste in nightly entertainment did not include poker, we also had a evening movie that would show on the second floor after it got dark, or you could go one more flight up and enjoy the sights of our neighborhood from our third floor outdoor deck or even our forth floor Widow's Watch.

For a while we had a neighbor across the street who provided us with a daily look into his private life. The guy was obviously a civilian and was also a lot older than any of us. Every afternoon he would come out on his second story balcony, paunchy, with thinning hair and clad in a t-shirt and boxer style drawers. He had a table where he would set up a little portable TV set, and then he would unfold a copy of Pacific Stars and Stripes. He would quietly sit there reading for a few minutes until a sweet little Vietnamese girl would come out with his evening cocktail. Unlike us beer-swilling inebriates, he drank like a gentleman. I know this does not sound exciting, but we were fascinated by his routine, and those of us who were back in from field assignments would make it our off duty routine to watch his routine. We knew all his moves and what would happen when. It was like watching a favorite TV show of our own. Horny, lecherous young bastards that we were, we sometimes wondered if he was "doinking" the sweet little Vietnamese girl who waited on him. This notion gave rise to the fabricating of intricate and detailed sexual fantasies about their relationship, that each of us would then relate to our group, sending all of us into spasms of drunken laughter.

There were other adventures during the months I served in Vietnam, often boring and dull, sometimes scary and sometimes even funny. Like the time we were filming a marine corps military advisory group up north near Phu Bai, who were trying to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese through building projects and medical care. At one little village, as the light began to fade, we found ourselves waiting for our truck driver. It was time to leave. Good deeds or not, after dark the place was under the control of the

enemy. The officer in charge of the detail asked where the young marine driver was, to which one of the other guys in the back of the truck replied, "He's in a hootch getting laid sir." That seemed to satisfy the officer and after a few minutes the driver happily returned to duty.

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DAY TWO. 7 MAY 1968.

Day two of the new enemy offensive started like the first day had, hot, humid, and scary. The sun rose over the city of Saigon. Once known as the Pearl of the Orient, Saigon was now more like a sweaty old whore. It was crowded with garbage and other filth, American soldiers, homeless refugees from the war, criminals looking for a way to make money off the war, and the average city dweller trying to get though life there the best way they could. Overhead there was the constant drone of helicopters flying across the city. It was always there, like a kind of background "white noise." Down on the ground, across the street from our villa, beggars and whores competed with street vendors for the American buck. There were two good things about that day however, Harry Breedlove was back from the hospital and Ed Hawes was not going to be brought up on charges by the lieutenant. Instead he was going to get another chance to redeem himself. Once again, our lieutenant would lead the charge into battle. This time it would be Staff Sergeant Al Batungbacal on motion picture camera, Ed Hawes shooting stills, and yours truly was to drive them to the action and then while they went out in search of the lieutenant's glory I was to stay behind and guard the damn truck. When I found out I was going to be left behind with the truck, sitting there in the middle of a rubble strewn street with only myself for protection, I almost wished I was following the lieutenant into battle instead.

Being alone in a combat zone, guarding a fucking truck was pretty scary business too. It wasn't like I could lean back in the shade, smoke a cigarette and read the morning paper. Somewhere out there were these nasty little people with guns who would love to put a bullet in my head and steal the damn truck. For the next couple of hours all my five senses were on overload, calling out to me like that arm flailing character, Robbie the Robot in the TV series Lost in Space, "Warning, warning Will Robinson" he was saying. Only it wasn't young Will, it was me. I parked the truck next to a ruined building that was missing the front wall but had its other three sides intact. I set myself up in a kind of defensive position behind the truck with the building behind me to cover my back. I stood there and for the next couple of hours, I listened to the sound of distant battle, the rustling of the wind blowing through ruined stores and homes. And even though it was broad daylight the phantoms I had imagined while on guard duty during the night came back to visit me in that hot, dusty place. I was totally alone. Not a soul was on the street. Not even one of the miserable curs that passed for dogs in this shitty country. Unlike American dogs, Vietnamese dogs lived in total fear of the human race and for good reason. Dog meat was considered just another source of protein here , so Vietnamese dogs would slink around with their tail between their legs, avoiding human contact and trying to remain off the dinner plate. Now Vietnamese dogs that were raised by Americans acted like their cousins back in the states. They were outgoing and confident with strangers and family alike. We had two young dogs back at the villa that we had adopted and named Cry Baby and Dip Shit. They were supposed to be our first line of defense at night if anyone tried to slip in on us. Unfortunately no one had explained that to them, so they slept better at night than we did.

My time in solitary hell finally ended when the guys returned from their assignment. Hawes was totally forgiven and you could see it on his face. The Boss decided we would return to the villa,

regroup and prepare for the afternoon's foray into history. This truly was a commuter's war. Go to battle in the morning, have lunch and do a little war in the afternoon. It was a very civilized way to go to war. When we walked through the front door of the villa and into cool interior of our home away from home, it was like entering a different world. The front entrance was a glass and wrought iron accordion door. Once inside you were standing under a high ceiling fan that actually pushed the heat away. The tile floors felt cool to the touch, and after those hours of sweating in the humidity saturated world outside, it felt good.

I went upstairs and fell into my bunk. My roommate, Tom Larson, was sitting on his bunk cleaning his weapon. Tom was a quiet, gentle kind of guy who wore glasses, and looked more suited to sitting in a graduate school library reading a book than hanging with our bunch of derelicts. He had, however, earned himself a purple heart. I rolled over and looked at him, my sweat stained jungle fatigues starting to pick up the chill from the air conditioner in our room.

"Tom, the lieutenant is going to get us all killed. "

"You think?"

"Yeah. He's got me going out of my fucking mind"

"There's not much any of us can do about it."

"I know. I just don't know how long I can follow this crazy bastard around."

I had a baby daughter who had been born less than a month before. I wanted to live to meet her. Little did I know at that moment just how long it would be before I found salvation from this situation.

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This was not my first experience with "Seeing The Elephant," which is what the experience of combat has been called since the American Civil War. I guess a circus elephant was some very strange and wondrous thing to the country boys who fought that war. To me it's meaning has a more Zen simplicity that is felt rather than explained. It's that big UNKNOWN that soldiers face before and during their first time in combat. How will you do? It's bad enough that you face getting killed for Christsake. You have to also worry about what if you will turn and run and make a fool of yourself in front of your colleagues.

Several months previous I had been sent out on a search and destroy with Chuck Abbott, the wisdom being to have my "war cherry" plucked, as it were. I don't think Chuck was too pleased at being privy to my rite of passage. He had covered plenty of combat during the recent Tet Offensive a few weeks prior, and he was also nearing the end of his three-month temporary duty rotation with the Vietnam team. He was suffering from Short Timers syndrome, or better known as "fear of getting killed at the last minute." When I first arrived in-country Saigon was still under strict military shut down. People still carried weapons in the city. The paranoia of that near debacle was still palatable on the streets.

To start our journey Chuck and I caught a ride on a Chinook helicopter at Tan Son Nhut Airbase. The lumbering giant took us north to nearby Chu Chi, the main base camp for the 25th Infantry Division. When we landed a short twenty minutes later, I found that I was temporally deaf, a result of the extreme noise level of the ship's engines. Nobody had told me to wear earplugs. Chuck and I walked over to the nearby Division Public Information Office

where we would set up our assignment to accompany one of their units in the field the next day. While Chuck set things up with the PIO people, I sat in deaf ignorance and pretended to listen.

We were quartered with the PIO enlisted men, sharing their tent and a couple of empty bunks belonging to guys who were out in the field. As the sun went down we sat outside the tent drinking beer and gossiping with our hosts. One photographer proudly showed us the .357 Magnum revolver he carried in the field. His family had sent it to him from back home. Another guy talked about the ins and outs of building a proper bunker. He joked that when he got home he was going to sandbag his entire fucking house. I didn't understand why bunkers and sandbags was such an important topic around the tent until we settled down a couple of hours later. As I started to lie down I noticed that, despite the stifling heat in the tent, none of the other guys had taken off their uniforms or even their boots. I thought this odd, but decided to mimic our hosts. Later that night, just as had somehow drifted off into something that resembled sleep the quiet was cut by the sound of incoming rounds and the wail of the camp's air raid siren. Everyone moved as one, in the total darkness I could feel bodies moving past me and out the tent. I grabbed what was left of the six pack I bought earlier and headed outside and then down a rabbit hole that was the entrance to the bunker. I was moving a little faster than the guy in front of me, landing on his back, and then we both rolled into the damp darkness of the bunker. Then I discovered that I had landed on Chuck! Sheepishly I handed him a warm beer.

Somebody in the bunker took a role call and they discovered that two of their bunkmates had stayed topside.

"They figure it's over already and don't want to leave their racks," somebody offered.

Somebody turned on a portable radio and we listened to armed forces radio out of Saigon. I passed around the last of my beers and we all lit cigarettes. The sirens had stopped and it was quiet. We sat in the darkness and waited for the all clear.

Suddenly there were more incoming rounds, closer than the last ones. Up in the tent we heard two sets of boots hit the wood floor and two shapes flitted through the bunker entrance. The two "old soldiers" had joined our group. Everyone settled down once again to wait for the all clear. The night went on like that. Try to fall asleep and then another motor and rocket attack. This went on until at some point sleep finally came and the next thing I knew Chuck and I were being awakened by a flashlight in the face and a voice telling us it was time to get up and join our host unit in the field. We gathered our stuff and followed a couple of soldiers out into the dark to a waiting jeep. I was so groggy from lack of sleep I was barely aware of my surroundings. The base was almost totally dark and without any bearings as to where we were heading we were speeding out a side gate to the base and driving down a dirt road that ran parallel to the camp perimeter. The headlights of our jeep cut through the darkness as we continued to drive in the almost total darkness. Ahead I could see what appeared to be campfires and as we got closer I saw that our host unit had apparently spent the night camped out in a Vietnamese cemetery. The darkness was beginning to turn into morning twilight and I could see soldiers among the tombstones, some standing others trying to sleep for a few seconds more. There was equipment and the remains of C ration boxes strewn around in seeming disorder. Smoke from the fires filtered the scene into an almost impressionist-like picture. All my senses were on overload. I felt like a stranger in an alien world. Our jeep stopped and Chuck and I hopped out. We had arrived.

Shadowed forms with voices greeted us and we learned that we were going to ride with C Company, 2nd Battalion, 27th Infantry.

They were also known as the Wolfhounds, a nickname the unit picked up at the end of World War One when our grandfathers had fought in Russia on the side of the Czarist Russians against the forces of the newly formed Communist government. History seemed to be repeating itself for them in this war, although most of them had no idea of the historic irony they were playing out.

The sun was beginning to peek above the horizon and we could hear the familiar whump whump whump of Huey helicopters on the move. The soldiers quickly assembled into a line of small groups and waited for their approaching rides.

Chuck and I scrambled aboard the last chopper in line, a sort of catch all ride with us, a couple of extra radio operators and medics. We quickly took off in typical helicopter style, ass up, nose down. As we flew higher the machine leveled off and as we rose to a cruising altitude of about 3 thousand feet the heat and humidity of a typical Vietnam morning gave way to what felt like air conditioning in comparison. I began to shiver. Down below we could see miles of farms and dry rice paddies. After a few minutes our flight began to make it's descent towards the landing zone and the pilot advised us to put on our gas masks. I pulled mine over my face, took a deep breath and began to choke.

"Oh Christ," I thought. "This thing doesn't work."

One of the medics noticed my plight and handed me a length of surgical gauze.

"Use this," he advised.

Gratefully I took the gauze but at the same time I wondered what kind of gas they had dropped on the landing zone and how would this stuff protect me. As I followed the soldier in front of me out the door I suddenly had this feeling of déjà vu.

It was as if I had done this before. I could almost hear CBS television anchor Walter Conkite doing a voice over. I had done this many times, only it was while I was back home, watching it on the nightly television news. The thought didn't last very long, because then I jumped.

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"The navy sails, the air force flies."
"The marines fight, the army sucks."
Written on a mess hall wall at Camp Enari,
South Vietnam.

DAY THREE. 8 May 1968.

It was another hot, humid day in Saigon. Fighting still continued in pockets of resistance around the city. You could tell it was safer in our part of town because normal patterns of life had returned to the streets around us. People were coming and going and doing business, as if nothing was wrong. I guess it was normal for the Vietnamese. They had been living with this war for many years. It had become a part of the rhythm of their lives. We had learned that one of the members of our team had been wounded while on assignment up country. Ted Acheson had caught a piece of shrapnel when an inexperienced soldier threw a grenade in a VC bunker and the enemy had time to throw it back out. The young soldier paid for his mistake with his life. Ted had been patched up and was doing fine, but now he trying to make his way back to Saigon. Ted and I, along with Craig Farrell had flown to Vietnam together on the same flight. During the trip our Pan American Airlines plane made a scheduled stop at Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines. When we got back on the plane for the flight to continue to Saigon I noticed that the First Class section of the plane was now empty.

It was an interesting take on the social-economic demographic that was fighting this war. Later we shared a view of South Vietnam as our Pan American jet flew at 32 thousand feet over the war zone. Down below us was a mosaic of color in swirling pastels that were dotted with perfectly round points of blue. It looked so beautiful. As our flight descended into Saigon airspace we soon discovered those pretty points of blue were actually water-filled bomb craters from artillery and B52 bomber strikes.

The three of us were abruptly confronted by reality as we departed the air conditioned comfort of our plane, the pretty flight attendants wishing us luck as we stepped out into a hot and humid envelope of sound and smells. Tan Son Nhut Airbase was the busiest airport in the world. Lumbering cargo planes competed for space on the tarmac with sleek fighter jets, the sounds of their engines deafening to the ears. As we jogged towards the terminal building the humidity caused our dark glasses to fog up and our khaki uniforms to stick to our sweating bodies. It was a complete assault to the senses. Once inside the cooler darkness of the terminal building we really had a sense that we were, "not in Kansas anymore." There was a large hole in the roof where a mortar round had blasted through the night before. Vietnamese soldiers and customs agents were everywhere, their sing-song language echoing off the walls. American Military Police directed us towards the customs area where our orders were checked. Before we knew it we were outside, luggage in hand, waiting for our ride which was not long in coming.

A big blue US Navy van came careening up, at the wheel was a big, laughing redhead we all recognized was Rick Rein. We were all a bit anxious and maybe a little scared, but Rick appeared as if he could care less. We loaded our stuff in the van and got inside. Rick launched into a funny monologue about the country and war in general as he swerved, swore and gunned the van through the busy city traffic. The streets were a crazy patchwork of excitement,

jammed with civilian and military traffic, and the smell of exhaust fumes and the earthy smells of life in a foreign culture that lived closer to nature than we did. Small French built Renault cabs competed with American Jeeps and larger military vehicles. Everyone was honking their horns. People were out there on the street, selling their wares, arguing about prices, eating, begging and buying. Saigon was a work in progress. There was construction work going on everywhere. The city was swollen to many times its original population by refugees from the war. Because of the recent Tet Offensive you could feel the tension on the street. It was hard to take in all these views because the windows of the van were covered with a heavy wire mesh. When we asked Rick about the mesh, he laughingly answered,

"To keep the fucking grenades out."

Rick had a wonderful, funny take on life. His sense of humor was infectious. One afternoon, a bunch of us were standing on the very top level of the villa roof, bored and drinking beer. Rick noticed that on the deck of the house behind us a young Vietnamese girl wearing something more appropriate for bedtime than what she was doing, which was hanging laundry on a clothesline. Rick got her attention and he was trying to talk her into coming up to see him. She coyly kept refusing. At one point he threw down a length of rope that was lying on our roof and invited her to climb up and see him. When she refused this offer he paused for a moment...we were all ears by now...and then he yelled down to her,

"Well how about you run six feet of this rope between your legs so I can sniff it."

The rest of us nearly fell off the roof laughing. Rick always enjoyed himself and I think that's why we all liked him so much.

War does not recognize popularity however, and seven months later he was killed when the helicopter he was photographing from in exploded and then cart wheeled into the jungle after being shot down by enemy ground fire.

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The sun was not very high in the sky and The Boss was hot to trot. Time was a-wasting. There was a war out there to be photographed. So we saddled up and headed out into the streets of Saigon. I wish I could report that his enthusiasm for all this action was infectious. Fact is we were all still processing the fact that another one of our own had been wounded this week. Fortunately the lieutenant's source of battle intelligence had exceeded his ability to get us out to the scene of the action and so after driving around the Cholon district of the city for a couple of hours we returned to the villa empty handed. At this point I should add that we had recently heard a report that four Australian journalists had been gunned down while doing exactly what The Boss had ordered us to do, mainly driving around in the same part of town, clueless to where we were going. In the case of the unlucky group of civilian journalists, they had stumbled into an enemy roadblock and were not able to get away from the withering gunfire that was delivered in their direction.

Naturally the story about the dead journalists was on our minds as we made our way through the empty streets of Cholon. Now an empty street is a bad sign. It's like the people who live and work there know something that we don't. I guess God looks out better for soldiers led by an over zealous officer than a jeep load of civilian journalists. We returned to the villa from our abortive military adventure untouched. Needless to say, the lieutenant was not to be deterred. After a few phone calls, he had gathered enough information to lead us out on yet another "mission."

Meanwhile none of us in the lieutenant's regular group of combat commandos could help but notice that none of our colleagues who were in from the field were doing much except wave goodbye to us as we pulled out of the driveway. This time his information was better and we soon found ourselves near an area where the South Vietnamese Air Force was conducting air strikes in support of Vietnamese infantry against a suspected enemy force that was operating in a crowded Cholon neighborhood. We decided to follow a column of Vietnamese Rangers as they worked their way down narrow streets towards the area of the air strikes. Overhead we could see low flying World War Two vintage aircraft dropping napalm along a line directly in front of our position. The rangers suddenly opened up as we moved through a small cemetery, chips of tombstone skipped into the air as automatic weapons were fired across the cemetery into a line of buildings ahead of us. The lieutenant could not contain himself and so he began blasting away at the tombstones with his M-16, blowing them into shards of stone. The Vietnamese officer in charge of the column looked at him in disbelief. Finally the firing stopped and we began to move forward again. At this point we were so close to the area of the bombing that shrapnel from the destroyed buildings came raining down on our position. I crossed my fingers and hoped they pilots knew what the hell they were doing and that they knew we were down there so close to where they were dropping their bombs.

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It's amazing to me just how horror much the human mind can absorb. I think at some point the body produces something that numbs the brain. Sgt. Al Batungacal and I were walking down a nearly deserted street when we saw two Vietnamese rangers pick the body of a middle aged woman up out of a water filled ditch, and then laughing they let her drop back under the filthy water. When they saw our cameras they reached down and pulled her up again, in the hope I guess that we would take their picture with

their "trophy." They waited for a moment or two, grinning from ear to ear. When we didn't respond, they dropped her once again and walked away as if nothing had happened. Killing was like big business here. The dead were a growth industry. While that poor woman would probably end up in a mass grave somewhere, the bodies of Americans who died in Vietnam had a better fate.

Located at the end of the runway at Tan Son Nhut was the US military's Saigon Mortuary. If in the neighborhood, most soldiers avoided the place. Outside the embalming building Vietnamese civilians kept busy washing out recently used dark green body bags with a high-pressure hose. Nearby was a large stack of shiny, silver human remains shipping containers. The bodies of soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines who had been killed in battle, accidents or disease often came in within hours of their deaths. Our photo team was assigned to shoot the mission of the mortuary for both documentary purposes and for a training film.

The mortuary was divided into two major sections. The personal property section where they catalogued the last things these men had kept with them. Watching the clerks sift through these things I couldn't help but think how banal all these objects were considering the extreme circumstances that had brought them to this place. There was civilian and military clothing, boots and shoes, shoe polish and shoe brushes, writing paper and envelopes, pens and, pencils, radios and extra batteries, photographs, cameras and stereo gear, small portable TV sets, cassette tapes, wedding rings, dog tags, college and high school class rings, tooth paste and tooth brush, condoms, malaria pills, razors and shaving cream, deodorant, hair brushes, cigarettes and lighters, dark glasses, letters from home, military decorations, note books, comic books, paperback books, sports magazines, diaries, new car catalogues, girlie magazines, newspapers from home, Vietnamese money and the so-called Funny Money we used to replace regular American currency, military pay certificates, and many other ordinary things

that forged a kind of lifeline between life back home and this extraordinary place. All this stuff was inventoried, sanitized and eventually sent to the next of kin back home. For all intensive purposes the kin got a box full of stuff that looked like it came from the corner laundry instead of a heat drenched jungle full of malaria, blood, guts and death. A second lieutenant in the Finance section of the Personal Property Depot, wearing spit shined boots and a properly starched and creased uniform proudly told me that the men who were killed in Vietnam generally got a better quality coffin than they would have in civilian life. I wondered how the dead would to respond to that? Maybe they would have preferred getting a lesser quality coffin, say fifty or so years from now. In a war zone of the haves and the have-nots, the lieutenant did not see the irony in his statement. Meanwhile, the other side of the facility was dedicated to the remains of those dead.

The entrance to the embalming area had two signs. On one side was a sign that said, "Out Processing." Here the finished product was put on display for final inspection before being boxed and shipped. I shouldn't have...God knows I knew better, but I peeked into the Out Processing room. The remains of a soldier that the field GI's referred too as a Crispy Critter lay on display in a shipping casket. The guy looked more like a side of beef that President Johnson had barbequed on the LBJ ranch in Texas. Next to the body was a green, Class-A army uniform. The whole thing was swaddled in heavy duty clear plastic. I ducked out and went through the door on the other side of the hallway with the "In Processing" sign. This decision proved to be no more inviting.

Here I was confronted by the sight of a mortuary technician leaning on a waist-high gurney that contained the body of a helicopter pilot who had burned to death when his chopper went down. The corpse lying in the gurney had been reduced to a skeleton with bits of blackened flesh and charred uniform hanging from the bones. The mortuary guy was talking to another soldier

about his up-coming R and R in Hawaii and how he was going to fuck his wife's brains out when he got there. He was leaning against the end of the gurney in such a way that his face was only inches from the dead pilot's skeletal feet. The gurney had an inch high rim around it and on the bottom of I could see a brownish juice like you would see on your plate if you were eating a big steak. I guess you would call it Man Juice. The whole thing was so surreal that my mind could not completely comprehend what I was looking at was real. The guys who worked here seemed to take it for granted. Many of them had worked in funeral homes back home.

While some soldiers brought to the business of war the expertise they had learned as civilians, for the career officers and sergeants , war was their business. While shooting an assignment in the Delta on the spraying of Agent Orange, I happened to overhear the major in charge of the unit talking to our PIO escort officer about the command assignments he had during his career. A combat command seemed to be a necessary step in his rise through the officer ranks. As I heard him put it,

"Vietnam is the only war we've got and I have to make the most of it."

The business of war was very good, as the folks who worked at the mortuary well knew.

Motion picture cameramen Bert Peterson and Stewart Barbee had been assigned to shoot this project. No two dissimilar personalities could have been paired up to shoot this film. Burt was blonde, handsome, with a muscular build that he was obviously very proud of. He had a distant personality and this strange way of smiling when he talked to you that you couldn't tell if he was smiling at you or smirking. Stew was a laid back stoner from California who we all called "Outta Sight," because it was his favorite expression.

Stew was an extremely accomplished motion picture cameraman and brought a lot of passion to his craft. While Bert never gave any indication of being disturbed by the experience of working in the mortuary, Stew would later spend years trying to get over it. For this assignment they had to set up lights, put the camera on a tripod and do the whole thing like a movie production. In a sense, all we needed to do was add the classic horror film actors Vincent Price or Boris Karloff to do the sound over to make this production a complete horror movie. I was there to step and fetch whatever they needed fetched.

The main embalming room was large and spacious, but the smell of embalming fluid permeated the place. On each side of the room were about eight embalming tables. Most were occupied by green body bags that were still zipped up like macabre Christmas presents, waiting to expose the horrors within. As Bert and Stew set up to shoot the scene, I watched a technician slowly massage the rigger mortise out of the stiffened arm of a dead soldier that was partially wrapped around him. Across the isle another technician was slowly lift the bowels out of the stomach of a cadaver and carefully placing it in a plastic bag. The top of the man's head had been carefully sawed off with the skin draped over the edges into the empty space where the brain had once been. It looked sort of like a human head ashtray. The corpse had this amazingly placid expression on its face.

The hardest thing to look at was not the remains that were totally fucked up. The hardest to look at were the young soldiers who lay there on the table and appeared to be untouched by any kind of wound. They looked asleep, like they could get off the table at any time. This was the place where the final toll of our war was extracted. Somebody had to die, and we were callous enough to look down on these fellow soldiers and think, "Sorry, but better you than me pal." As one friend once reminded me, it's not like any of us was going to volunteer to take their place.

At the end of the first days shooting there we trudged back to the villa where Sgt Breedlove had treated everyone to a night of steaks cooked on the grill. When I looked down at my plate and saw the char-cooked meat and the dark juice beneath it, I pushed it aside and took my beer up to the roof.

DAY FOUR. 9 May 1968.

As usual my turn at guard duty came at an ungodly hour. At night our rooms were lit in a gentle bath of red light, allowing our eyes to become accustomed to the dark in a hurry if uninvited guests should arrive. My early morning dreams were broken up by a guy we all called "Talmadge B." He was former disc jockey from Newport Arkansas and even in that dim light I could see that he was wearing the hair net he usually slept in. Talmage was very particular about his hair and managed to keep it just a tad over the Army's strict haircut length regulations. Now don't get me wrong. He wasn't "funny", if you get my drift. It was more like he was just ahead of the rest of us. Talmadge spent a lot of time on his hair. Instead of going to a barbershop, he had his hair styled. Now this was years before guys abandoned the males-only domain of the traditional barbershop, where fathers took their sons for their first haircut and where there was lots of sports talk and male bonding. Guys abandoned all that tradition for unisex hair salons where men and women shared fashion magazines and hair cutters of nonspecific sexual orientation. Yep, Talmadge was ahead of his time.

Even in the midst of the terrors of a war zone there were funny things happening. Like the time our late night poker game was broken up by the unexpected arrival of an American civilian from the US Embassy. He burst in and told us that our villa was in danger of being attacked by a Viet Cong sapper unit. He took one look at Sergeant Batungbacal and started chattering away to him in some obscure Filipino dialect. Equally surprising was that Bat

understood him. Later we learned that during World War Two the guy had served behind the lines in the Philippines during the Japanese occupation. We all started grabbing for our weapons, flak jackets and helmets; that is until we began to notice that on the street outside our villa a very large group of Vietnamese police was setting up a road block and making a great deal of noise. At that point it became pretty obvious that nobody was going to be able to sneak up on us with all that noise going on outside.

Bat finally got rid of the civilian and we all proceeded up to the roof to drink beer and watch the fun. Well, not quite all of us. One of member of our group, John Sandri argued that we still needed to maintain our own security inside the villa. Finally Sgt. Batungbacal gave in and let him have his way. Sandri set up his defensive position on the second floor, armed with an M-16 and wearing his steel pot and flak jacket. Now that was okay by us. The problem was he was posted between our group on the roof and our beer supply on the ground floor. So, in order to avoid becoming victims of "friendly fire" we took to announcing ourselves as we traveled down and up the stairs on beer run.

"John, don't shoot. It's only me"

Talmadge's early morning wake up turned out to be the beginning of a pivotal day in the course of my life. By the time my turn on guard was over, daylight had arrived, and with it time for the return of the lieutenant's little group of combat commandos to the war on our fair city's streets. As our maids served us coffee at the dining room table, the lieutenant was on the phone getting the latest dope on places where we could get some combat footage. Bat, Hawes and I sat at the table listening and wondering what this day would bring. I had already made up my mind that this was the last time I was going out with the crazy bastard. After today I would outright refuse to go. The military didn't take kindly to refusals to go into

battle. That could mean an article 15 or even worse, jail. I didn't care.

Our next adventure would take place somewhere in the Cholon district of Saigon, The Boss really wasn't sure where. We would merely drive through the still empty streets until we found some action. It was nuts. Fortunately fate was in our favor and we finally came upon some kind of operation that was about to begin. I parked our jeep behind a position that was defended by an American tank. We were in some kind of residential neighborhood and a platoon of South Vietnamese Army Rangers were getting ready to advance down the street the tank was blocking. Bat climbed out and pulled the Arriflex BL motion picture camera on his shoulder. The Boss was too impatient to wait for us, he was all ready crawling on top of the tank and looking down the street. The senior Vietnamese officer agreed to let us accompany his group down the road. They were expecting trouble, but despite this The Boss insisted that he and Sgt. Batungbacal accompany the lead elements of the force. To me to go out with the point was fucking crazy so since he hadn't ordered me to follow them that closely, I chose to lay back and walk in the center of the column. The Vietnamese spread out on both sides of the street and slowly began to move forward. Everyone sort of hugged the buildings along the side of the street. My heart was pumping on overtime. Adrenaline rush, too much nicotine, or just plain old scared shitless. It didn't matter it all produced the same sensation. I don't know just how far we got before the shooting started...but it did and everyone hit the deck and tried to find a way to hid from the firing. I looked across from me and exchanged a glance with a Japanese reporter. His eyes said "how the hell did I get here," I wondered too. Suddenly there was a quick barrage of gunfire up ahead. Before I knew it, soldiers were retreating back towards my position and I quickly joined them. Not wanting to be shot in the back, I began trying to run with my body turned sideways. In short order we were all back to the tank and here I found Ed Hawes waiting.

"Where is Bat and the lieutenant," he asked.

"I lost track of them."

We waited next to the tank. It seemed like the Vietnamese rangers had all but disappeared. This is strange, but I felt almost totally alone at that moment. Suddenly we sighted Sgt. Batungbacal and the lieutenant running with the last elements of the Rangers. Bat seemed to be supporting The Boss under one arm and at the same time carrying his heavy camera. The lieutenant had lost his M-16 and now we could see that he had been wounded. His shoulder was bleeding. Hawes and I ran out and helped support the lieutenant, while scrambling back behind the tank we ducked in to an abandoned home and found a table to lay the lieutenant so we would see if he needed immediate attention for his wound. He seemed to be bleeding badly so I created a tourniquet with the microphone cable from my tape recorder. Then, seeing that he was stable, we hustled him back towards our jeep. Firing had started up and I thought we were taking incoming rounds. We jumped into the jeep and took off as I speed shifted the jeep down the road. I don't know how we found it, but there was a Vietnamese field hospital set up in a nearby racetrack. We pulled up next to the main entrance of what appeared to be a medical tent and walked The Boss inside. We had found the right place. The trouble was The Boss made it clear he didn't want some gook doctor working on him and kept complaining he wanted an American doctor. Fortunately the doctor was a professional and he ignored our lieutenant's racist attitude while he cleaned and dressed the wound. Once we had The Boss back in the jeep, I went back inside and thanked the doctor for taking care of him. I looked him right in the eye. I wanted him to know that we thought the lieutenant was a racist asshole too.

Later we finally got him to the Third Field Hospital, the same facility we had taken Harry Breedlove three days before. We handed him to the medics and returned to the villa. As we pulled up into the yard several of the guys came out to greet us. Tom Hansen noticed someone was missing and immediately asked,

"What happened to the lieutenant."

"He got shot", we answered.

A large smile slowly spread across his face.

"Oh, really."

Our ordeal was finally over. Exhausted and played out we dropped our equipment and collapsed around the dining room table. It was at this point that I dawned on me that I would not have to make good refusing to go out with The Boss anymore. Instead of becoming a military goat, I was now destined to be labeled a fucking hero. Such is the irony of chance. The next few days we ignored the war. The lieutenant was flown to Japan for further treatment on his arm, and another lieutenant was flown in from Hawaii to take his place.

Thus did the enemy offensive later known as the Post-Tet Offensive, or the May Offensive, pass into history.

Nineteen months later, dressed in my class-a uniform, I walked into a small standing room only bar at New Orleans International Airport. The place was empty except for two very drunk Cajun oil workers. They had apparently cleared all the "polite" people out of the place with their good natured, but loud, combination of Creole French and exquisitely obscene English. The bartender didn't seem to care. They had lots of money and were spending it.
. They took an instant liking to me. I guess they "read" my service ribbons and guessed I was getting out of the army. I had an hour to kill before my flight to Tampa, so I started to buy myself a beer. But my money was no good. For the next 45 minutes I drank and listened as these two guys bought me drinks, swore, laughed and good naturedly slapped me on the back.

The Poet Laureate of Profanity at Fort Benning Georgia couldn't hold a candle to these guys. I smiled. Time was up. A little drunk, I said goodbye to my new "best" friends and walked towards my flight's gate.

I had another plane to catch.