

FROM FLOWER POWER TO QUANG TRI

James B. [Jim] Evans

Near the completion of training at Fort Sam Houston, I received a mimeographed order for "your firm port call. Report to USA Overseas Replacement Station, Oakland, California no later than 1200 hrs, 26 October 1969. For the commander Joseph J. McGarry." I flew from Dallas to San Francisco for a last few days of freedom surrounded by hippies, brightly colored tie dyed, Afros, flowing dresses, flower power and placards announcing the November Vietnam Moratorium Parade. A hippie woman gave me a printed invitation bearing Richard Nixon's photograph:

"This man can't make up his mind to end the war in Vietnam Help him decide! From the Oct. 15 Moratorium, continue the Fall Offensive to end the Vietnam war - - - March Nov. 15 San Francisco bring All the GIs home NOW

Immediate and total withdrawal from Vietnam
Self-determination for Vietnam and Black America
Stop the repression - Free all political prisoners
End ABM and all forms of militarism
End racism and poverty
Free speech for GI's

The hippie invited me to join the demonstration. "Thanks, I'll have to miss the parade since I will be out of the country." Perhaps with my short hair she knew where I was going. She smiled and moved on.

Oakland army shipping yard offered two days of tedium, getting jungle fatigues, waiting, no chance to get away, processing on the way to hell, waiting in sterile Army offices, filling out forms. How many times to you have to give your serial number? Don't they know that fucking number yet? More and more paperwork, more and more orders. 26 October 1969 another mimeographed order on rotten cheap paper; on the front orders for Sentry Dog Handler; next page with my name was nearly illegible:

Rel fr asg: USA OS REPL STA (WODL-01) this sta
Asg to: USARV TRANS DET APO SF 96384
Dest dsq: Vietnam

AMD: SUU-HOA-3PU-AZ

PCS: (MDC): 4A00

Tvl data: TO OAB willfurn nec MTA & trans to TAFB Calif for Trip to Nr
TPKW2B3/28/301 ETD TAFB Calif 0300 hrs 28 Oct 69.

Fiscal data: Per diem auth UP part F F chapter 4 JPR

EDSCA: 31 Oct 69

"Sp Instr: Indiv will arv RVN wearing cbt tropical unif with remaining POR cot
tropical issue in his possession. Field jacket will be carried as a comfort item.
Bag alw sixty-six 9660 lbs. Clothing requirements and travel unif are
prescribed in DA Circular, 700-17. Upon arr RVN off will rept to 90TH Repl BN
Long Binh for proc."

On 27 October at 1230 we reported for baggage processing and were ordered
to return to Building 590 at 2400 for transfer to Travis Air Force Base, Flight
W2B3 to depart 0300, 28 Oct wearing jungle fatigues. World Airways [the
contract flight prostitute for the US government] had a sick sense of humor.
The ticket informed us that this commercial flight was governed by the Warsaw
Convention that entitled "the carrier to limit its liability for each passenger for
death, wounding, or other bodily injury" to no more than \$75,000, "inclusive of
legal fees and costs." Will the Army pay the same for death, wounding or other
bodily injury? No, the Warsaw Convention doesn't apply to the military, just to
US military whores. Then we filled out our own execution order, our cheap
paper ticket from Travis Air Force Base near San Francisco to Bien Hoa,
alleged Republic of Vietnam. After dumping our luggage, we sat and briefly
talked in a metallic room, steel tables and hard chairs. We were losing our
words; conversation was forced. That night we had cardboard pizza but no one
could eat. At midnight we gathered for the dreaded bus ride to Travis Air
Force Base. Silence, oppressive quiet, as we gathered thoughts, withheld
feelings, and hoped for courage. Why didn't we go to Canada? Around 0400
we flew out on World Airways.

During the spring of 1969, I saw a Vietnam War protest play in Dallas. Death, a
woman with a skull face, said, "I welcome you with open thighs and a closed
heart." Thus said the stewardesses on World Airways. During take-off I
pressed my face into the window, tears flowing quietly, peering into fogged
pools of yellow in the parking lot lights below. Will I ever return? I felt for the
grunts [infantry] on the flight; their chances of being maimed or killed were far
worse than mine. During the first leg of the flight we slept or at least

pretended. In a few hours the jet touched down at Anchorage Airport in bright arctic light. In the airport terminal a large stuffed polar bear standing in a tall glass coffin was on display. Laughter was forced; guys joking in the locker room on the way to the big game, except this game was for your life. After Anchorage we flew over a lunar landscape of permafrost, blue-green frozen ponds in crisp clear light; then ocean.

Hours on this leg of the flight felt like days and still we were air-borne, bright clear light and finally land appeared below, the steep mountains of Japan. Suddenly the crystal beauty of Fujiyama, a snow covered cone, appeared, glowing against in bright blue sky. We circled this one-breasted goddess and landed at Yakota Air Force Base. Where is the laughter? Where are the locker room jokes? The Army has taken our lives, seized our clothes, dog-tagged our identities, given us numbers instead of names, X-rayed our teeth to identify our bodies. Did we leave the airplane? My mind was too paralyzed to remember. Hell's day is NOW. There was no exit, no way out; the corridors go in every direction, but all the same one-way path. We take off again. The sun was up before landing in Anchorage and it was bright unforgiving day all the way to Vietnam. Far below the mountains of Japan are hard ridged with arroyo thin valleys. Then sea, land again, Okinawa five miles below. Sea and then Formosa, miles below. The quiet grows; we have had strokes and lost our voices except for the inner roaring scream. Her thighs moan and her heart closes to us. No supplication will work now. She gives neither peace, nor piece, nor solace. Sea and more sea, hours that are days and years. To the west dense towering thunderclouds gather Vietnam as the plane begins its descent. Silence grows aboard. No one talks. What is there to say? Who will listen to our silent screams? The one-breasted goddess snaps her heart shut. Prayers no longer work. Who will come back? Who will come back in one piece? Vietnam is going to get a piece of our ass. Who will be maimed? Who will come back in a black plastic body bag, an identification tag tied to a big toe?

Then land below, Vietnam, the terrible place. The co-pilot announced, "Nha Trang." The rings of hell fast reach up and deeper we go, circling into the flat abyss. Closer and closer to landing, more and more details in the flat land below. Sharply the 707 descended, like a 727 compressed into a rock. We touchdown at Bien Hoa Air Base, kicked in the gut feeling on landing. The jet taxied to a sudden stop. The crew opened the forward doors and we waited. The heavy hot stagnant tropical air surged into the 707 and we waited,

drenched in sweat and apprehension. As we walked down the stairway to the tarmac, we saw crowds of men in faded jungle fatigues on the way home. They cheered us as our feet touch the ground. No, it's a chant, "Fresh meat! Fresh meat! Fresh meat!"

MACV, LONG BIEN

After running the gamut of year old jungle-fatigued jeers, we boarded a bus for Long Binh MACV compound. Why is there chain-link metal screen on the windows? To keep the grenades from biting. The bus driver is nonchalant going from Bien Hoa to the MACV compound. Why isn't he worried? This is a war zone! Doesn't he have a weapon? The MACV buildings are two or three story military issue concrete and cinder block, soulless places. The replacement barracks were military issue one-story wood billets with tin roofs. Feet pounding boots flattened the red dirt into sterility; the dirt swept front yards of the rural South without chickens, just us-chickens with our heads still on, too stupid to run. At the replacement barracks, I visited with Bill Neel [or Neal] who graduated a year or two ahead of me from Southwestern Medical School in Dallas. He has spent the last year living in an armored personnel carrier with the First Infantry, The Big Red One. What's a personnel carrier? What's it like living in a steel box? Maybe if he survived, I could get through the year. He relaxed in the shade of a thread-bare tree; Bill is bored, laid-back, doing time, waiting for the Freedom Bird back to THE WORLD. What do you mean THE WORLD? He is war-wearied; he has finished his tour. He endured the questions, conveying a tiredness that I don't understand. The world I just stepped into and the year that he just finished don't connect; he has passed beyond. I can't grasp what he has been through. But maybe there is hope.

Several of the men have been robbed as they slept at night in the BOQ. The enemy is us! I sleep with my billfold in my underwear. What about the mosquitoes? We don't have mosquito nets over the beds. What about malaria? What about rockets? What about mortars? I don't know about rockets or mortars. What's in-coming? What does out-going artillery sound like? What is that muffled noise in the distance?

The physicians were sent to personnel office in the MACV building for assignments after brief perfunctory interviews. 30 October 1969 another gibberish order; fill out another ticket for another ring of hell. HOA-Quang Tre,

no matter that I misspelled the destination on the ticket. Quang Tri isn't on the crude mimeographed map on the ticket. Hue was the northern most destination on the map. Where the fuck is it? Again we flew out in the middle of the night. Are these night flights designed to disorient us or the enemy? We left Bien Hoa at 0400 and arrived at Red Devil at 1000. The plane was a C-130, just a vast cargo bay; we strapped ourselves to the walls of the fuselage. There was a sudden roar; a jackrabbit ascent; once we were airborne the engines grind out of sync. Suddenly the plane descended just before dawn, the mountains are faint in the fog. We are in the Central Highlands, Pleiku or Kontum. My mind is fried beyond fatigue and sleep; my stomach burns with gnawing nausea. At 1000 the C-130 landed at Quang Tri, nearly on the DMZ. We picked up our luggage and struggled to the bus. What is this strange land? There is no chain mesh on the bus windows. What about the grenades? The bus dumped us at Company D, Replacement Company for 1/5 Infantry Brigade [Mechanized] at Red Devil on Halloween. I spent another sleepless night watching a red light blinking at the top of a radio tower near the billet. We got more uniforms, jungle green to match the red monsooned mud sand dirt that is everywhere. Equipment included steel pots, flack jackets and 45 caliber pistols. Jay Hubner, another 1968 Southwestern Medical School graduate, was on the flight with me from the US; there is roulette with the orders. He goes to 1/11 Infantry Battalion and I, to 1/77. The numbers mean nothing, but the destinations are different. 1/77 is an armored battalion stationed in Quang Tri; 1/11 Battalion is an infantry unit at Charlie 2, even further north than Quang Tri. But Quang Tri is extreme north South Vietnam; it's off the map on the ticket. Is it possible to go even further north and still not be in the DMZ or North Vietnam?