

The Rat

1 August 1969

Dear Keith and Judy,

How have things been? OK, I hope.

I'm in Long Binh right now, waiting to get a permanent station, when I do I will write and give you my address. So far I haven't had a chance to check out the grass situation over here, but when I do, I'll send you a birthday present.

I've been sitting around here since Monday evening with nothing to do but sit in an air conditioned cafeteria, where I eat and drink my fill. Then, when I get bored, I go over to the air conditioned where I shoot pool, play records and shuffle board. Then, if it's hot enough, and it always is, I go hang out and swim in the pool. When evening rolls around, I put on my sergeant stripes and go over to the NCO club, which is much nicer than the enlisted men's club.

My first day here, I bought a beer for a guy who was returning for his second tour as a radar operator. He told me to buy some sergeant stripes pin down at the PX and put them on my collar when I want to go upscale and visit the NCO club where they have pizza and beer, as well as a band and go-go girls at night.

Then I stagger back to my private barracks and sleep as late as I want. I've been suffering through this duty ever since I arrive in Nam, 3 days ago. I'm one of four spare guards, out of 44 men who were selected to provide bunker guard at night. They started at the A's and I happened to be the 44th name on the list. The other 40 guys leave for their guard stations at 7PM and come back at 6AM and usually sleep all day.

I have 2 problems - money and the fact that I'll probably be assigned any day now and I'm sure that this will probably be the high point of the next 12 months. I think Long Binh's a different country because no one around here seems to know that there is a war going on, which just breaks my heart right now! War's hell!

I'm going to get a bit to eat and have a beer. Say hi to everyone for me and drop me a line as soon as I get an address, OK?

See you in about 360.

Ralph

I sat back and looked around, noticing that the USO envelopes were in the corner of the room with the stacks of paper and piles of pens and pencils. The EM (Enlisted Men) Club supplied plenty of letter material and encouraged us to write home.

After addressing the envelop, I walked the completed letter, along with a letter that I had written my father, over to the red outgoing mail bag, which hung on the wall next to the letter materials.

Every time I came into the club, I sat under the air conditioning vent, an area which I had identified on my first visit, which blew soothing, ice cold air down my back. For the first half hour, the cold, blowing air felt great but eventually I would begin to feel cold. What a glorious sensation, which I felt like I had to enjoy until it became uncomfortable.

Standing up, I stretched and looked around at the nearly empty club and decided to wander over to the swimming pool.

At the end of the day, after drinking too much cheap draft beer, I wandered into the nearly empty barracks. The heat was still unbearable and I took off everything except my green boxer shorts and lay down face first, spreading out on the bunk in an attempt to get cool. In the corner of the barracks was a large fan, blowing the hot air from one end of the barracks to the other, but the fan helped. The bunk that I picked was right in line with the nearly, useless fan, evaporating the sweat that continued to pour out of my body.

I hadn't been asleep for very long when I suddenly woke up with a start. The cobwebs quickly cleared and without moving I took stock of my surroundings. It felt like there was something on my back! And before I had come to any conclusions, it moved! Oh shit!

My mind was racing and every scenario that I came up with had a rat standing on my back. What were my options? I was afraid that if I made any sudden movement, the rat would respond by biting me. As my blood pressure soared, I considered lying still, and eventually, maybe, the rat would just walk away!

Not a chance!

The decision was made. As I tensed my muscles, deciding to let out a yell as I jumped and flipped over, hoping to scare the rat more than me. I tried to jump up and turn and run and yell all at the same time and as I looked down the nearly empty barrack, I saw the rat, as big as a small dog, scurry down the aisle and out the door.