

CHAPTER FIVE

The sounds of the hydraulics and gears again woke me up. I could feel the loss of speed and by the feelings in my ears I could tell we were descending fast. I immediately turned and looked out of the window to see the land coming below. It looked like the surface of the moon abandoned and full of craters. As the Starlifter moved forward and lower I began to see villages and some movement of what appeared to be people.

"What are those funny looking round things down there?" I asked.

"I think those are Vietnamese squatting in the rice field with those round straw hats." Jon Wahl said.

"Look over there!" Frank said excitedly.

"Wow those are artillery rounds or mortar rounds exploding right below us." Pearce said.

"I wonder if they are shooting at us?" Willie Jones asked.

"I don't think so. I don't think the rounds would be falling down there that's to straight down." I said.

My gut was beginning to move around a little seeing this. I turned to look at the other guys and could see that they were beginning to feel it too. The uneasiness and fear was in everyone's eyes although no one would readily admit it. Pearce was even beginning to look a little worried now.

The hydraulics began to squeal louder as the gears started to make that loud whine. All of a sudden there was a startling jerk as the landing gear of the big jet locked in position. I think everyone was startled from the looks on their faces. Funny, the other times we had landed I had not noticed such a hard jerk, and the squeal of the hydraulics

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weren't as audible. I guess it was because of where they would be touching the ground. The anxiety was building and my butterflies were flying in my stomach like they wanted to migrate east.

The giant wheels hit the runway with a loud squeak, then another as the Starlifter sat firmly down on the ground. Then the massive jets began to reverse their thrust and the plane began to decelerate at a fast pace. Soon we were taxiing down the runway toward the huge hangers. Fear and anxiety was at its apex as the large rear ramp began to lower. There was a sudden rush of hot air as it nearly took our breath away. The smell was so bad it almost gagged me. The air felt heavy, hot and very wet. I immediately started to sweat. I'm not sure if it was from the heat or the anxiety that had built up inside of me. It must have been the heat, because as we were able to see other military personnel walking around, they also seemed to be sweating. But that god awful smell was unreal. I had a problem keeping my stomach contents on the inside, they sure wanted to come up. The mammoth jet began to circle and position itself in her position on the hot concrete runway. The ramp slowly lowered to the ground. This was it, Vietnam, Republic of. This would be our home for the next year, and maybe forever.

"All right men you can step off the plane and as soon as I find out what is going on we will start unloading our equipment." Lieutenant Stockdale said. He then headed toward one of the massive hangers.

We slowly exited the rear of the plane not knowing what to expect. Standing outside one of the first things I noticed was the sun. Back in the states the sun always felt warm and I enjoyed being in it. But the sun here hurt. It just didn't feel right and seemed to cause pain as it touched my skin. It seemed so much more intense than the good old American sun.

I became startled as I looked up and saw all those gooks in black pajamas (the dress we were told that the enemy wore and for us to watch out for) over toward what

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appeared to be an airport terminal. I could only think that we had been over-run and not know it.

"Look!" I shouted as I pointed toward the gooks.

"Is that the enemy?" Pearce asked worriedly.

"Those are Vietnamese civilians waiting on their flight. We share the airport with them. The crew chief said as he was removing the straps and chains that had secured our equipment.

"What is that fucking smell?" I asked holding my nose tightly with my thumb and forefinger.

"Ah yes that's the smell of burning shit. See all those plumes of black smoke, the U S Military didn't know what to do with all of the GI's shit. Since there was no plumbing at these fire bases. They seem to think that if they pour diesel on the shit, which is caught in half of a fifty-five gallon drum, they can reduce the amount of shit they have to bury. It also has something to do with sanitation." The crew chief said.

It was my understanding that they flew in here frequently.

I also noticed that between all the noise of planes taking off and landing that I could hear gunshots and explosions that seemed to go on all of the time. It seemed that there never was a moment of silence, that something or someone was always making some kind of noise.

After an hour or so had passed we saw a C141 taxiing toward us.

"That must be the other guys." Bert Hubble said pointing toward it.

"I think it is." Replied Daryl Hubble who was Bert's twin brother.

I don't know how they did it but both brothers were in Vietnam and in the same unit. The regulations generally stated that two brothers could not be in a combat zone at the same time. But they were.

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The plain nosily taxied up to the next position on the runway and troops began to pour out the rear of the big Starlifter.

"How was your trip?" I asked Corsello.

"OK, after I dried out right after you guys left it came a turd floater. It rained so fucking hard I didn't think we were going to get out of there." Corsello replied.

"What the fuck is that smell?" He asked.

"Welcome to Vietnam. That is the smell of burning shit." I said.

"Shit?" He asked.

"Real human shit. I'll explain it later." I said.

"Damn that sun is hot. You can almost feel the rays slapping you in the face." He said.

Sergeant Sprowl was heading toward the buildings that Lieutenant Stockdale had disappeared in an hour earlier. In just a few minutes We saw a string of four trucks approaching along with our platoon leader and first sergeant.

"Listen up. We will start unloading our gear from the planes, then load the dogs and their crates onto these trucks. From here we will report to the 936 Veterinarian Detachment here at Tan Son Nhut air base. Where the dogs will be quarantined for eleven days. We will need volunteers to stay with the dogs those days to take care of their needs." Sergeant Sprowl said.

"I'll stay." I said almost before he had finished his last word. There was no way I was going to leave Sig alone anymore, I wanted to be with him.

"Me too." Frank said.

"Me too." Bert Hubble said.

"I'll stay." Pearce said.

"Me too." Jimmy Powrzanas said.

"John Carter will be in charge since he is our vet tech." Sergeant Sprowl said.

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The guys that had driven the trucks out to the planes looked rough. They gave the appearance of combat veterans that had seen plenty of action. They all had weapons, one had a sawed off twelve-gauge shot gun, another had an M16, and the First Lieutenant had a .45 caliber pistol. I could see that 101st patch and right above it was a ribbon like patch that read 42nd SCOUT DOG PLT. I was impressed with these rough looking guys I started feeling a little safer with these guys around.

Is this what we will look like in few months. I thought to my self

The 42nd Scout Dog Platoon had sent this group of handlers along with their CO down here to escort us back to Bien Hoa, the 101st rear area. From there we would go through six days of training at SERTS (Screaming Eagle Replacement Training Center.) From there we would deploy in the northern I CORPS. Bien Hoa was in the III CORPS.

It didn't take long for us to unload the giant C-141's then we were headed to 936 Vet. Det. on the other side of Tan Son Nhut. I noticed that everyone had weapons of some sort or the other. Where is mine? I thought. What was worse on the other side of the airstrip we were driving along the perimeter on this very dusty road I noticed tanks and personnel carriers all along what appeared to some sort of defensive positions. There was nothing but what appeared to be a couple rows concertina wire then nothing. Now is the time to start worrying. I thought to myself trying to look confident to the veteran soldiers that were escorting us.

It took what seemed like a long time to arrive at the 936th which was in the middle of nowhere. What a dumb place for the Veterinarians to be. I thought.

Outside of the rather large building and kennel area there were two captains waiting for us. Lieutenant Stockdale and Sergeant Sprowl approached them and were nodding back and forth with the captains and soon were on their way to tell us what to do next.

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"Listen up people. Put your dogs in those runs to the right of the offices. Then form up back at the trucks." Sergeant Sprowl said.

It took only a few minutes to have all of the handlers back in formation. We were really a tired crew I guess it was the jet lag. Everyone was exhausted but to psyched up to sleep, and I guess a little unsure exactly what was going on in this hot, stinky, and hostile country.

"All personnel assigned to the kennel detail can fall out and start feeding and watering the dogs, the rest can load up in the trucks." Sergeant Sprowl ordered.

"Sergeant Sprowl! Are you going to issue our weapons before you go?" I asked.

"We don't think you will need them just yet." He replied.

"Look around everyone has some kind of weapon, even the vet's here wear 45's. I said.

"Look Allen I don't think it will be safe for you men to be walking around with a pistol strapped to your hip!" Sergeant Sprowl said in a strong commanding voice.

This ain't right I thought to myself.

We watched as the trucks drove off down the dusty perimeter road. It was about noon Vietnam time and I was getting a little hungry. A few minutes later one of the specialist fives came around the corner and said.

"Hurry with feeding and watering the dogs and we will take you to a mess hall."

"I sure am hungry." I grumbled.

"You know I didn't even think about being hungry with all this confusion, But now that it was brought up I could use some food." Bert Hubble said.

We all agreed, and began to hustle with the feeding and watering. Then went around to the hospital area and said in unison "were ready."

The jeep we were in rounded the first curve and headed toward the main part of the airport. It must have ten miles to the mess hall. Once there I was expecting one of the Air

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Force's great meals, boy was I ever disappointed, it was plain old Army chow. As hungry as I was it tasted pretty good.

Back at the 936th Vet Det we finished cleaning the runs for the evening and were standing around when the staff started running around and getting an operating room ready.

The dust off (another term for medi-vac helicopter) came in quickly, and a sergeant jumped off then grabbed his dog and came running in to the Vet Det, his dog was limp and he had blood all over his jungle fatigues.

"You gotta save him doc you just gotta." The sergeant said almost in tears, and very upset.

"It doesn't look good but we will do what we can." The captain replied.

"Put him over there." The vet tech ordered as he pointed to an operating table in one of the rooms.

I had noticed that the sergeant was from the big red one (First Infantry Division). He was upset to the point he was almost hysterical. The veterinarians closed the door, and the handler paced back and forth awaiting some kind of reply.

"Excuse me sergeant we are new handlers in country and this may not be a good time but can I ask what happened." I asked.

"Yes well we were on a trail in the jungles west of here and had made contact earlier in the day. We found a blood trail and began to follow it. My dog was alerting all the way, but We couldn't find anything all of a sudden we walked down a small incline and hit a dead space(an area where the air is stale and not moving. It is very difficult for a scout dog to detect any thing in these areas). Suddenly, just about twenty meters in front of us, a gook with an AK jumped up and aimed it at me. My dog seeing the gook jumped just as the gook fired and took the round that would probably have hit me in the heart. He actually took a round for me. I think he knew what he was doing, because it looked like

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he saw the round coming. If it wasn't for him I would be dead now." The sergeant said with a quivering voice.

"I'm sorry. What happened to the gook?" I asked in a low tone.

"The impact of the round knocked the dog into me. The slack man (walks behind point shot that mother fucker about twenty times. I was too busy with my dog that I didn't have a chance to shoot, but if I could I would like to skin the bastards alive.

The vets emerged about thirty minutes after they had closed the door.

"I'm sorry Sarge but he was hit right through the heart and was dead instantly." The vet said.

"I understand, I knew that when he took the round but I had to hope there was something you could do." The sergeant replied in an even more quivering voice, and almost in tears.

"We have to perform an autopsy the regulations say. We have pulled his heart out if you want to see for yourself where he was hit." The vet said.

"I'd like that." The sergeant said in his sad tone.

The vet went back into the room and reappeared with this gigantic heart with a hole almost right in the middle. I had never realized just how big a dog's heart was.

"Thanks." The sergeant said as he took a quick look and turned and started walking down that dusty perimeter road.

This brought even more anxiety and fear into me, and I could see that the other guys were getting the thousand yard stare that is common among Vietnam troops.

I guess for the first time in my life I couldn't think of a word to say.

"This don't look good for us." Frank said.

"That was something else." Bert said

"You realize that there is a lot more action up north where we are going don't you." Jimmy said.

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"It's getting late and you guys have got to stay in a transient barracks just outside of the gate about four or five blocks." The vet captain said.

"Just how are we going to get there?" I asked.

"We can take you as far as the gate, but you will have to walk the rest of the way." The vet captain said.

I was now getting real worried about not having any weapon, and now we were going to spend the night outside the safety of the perimeter. I looked at the other guys and could see that they were all beginning to look a little worried.

The jeep roared up to the gate and we walked out into Saigon and the enemy world. This place was filthy and stank of rotting meat and burning shit. Other than that it looked like a very crowded slum area. All the streets were paved and there were rows of shops, it seemed like every other little room was a saloon of some type or some kind of place to eat. About three blocks down we saw a big piece of rotting meat hanging outside this place where a bunch of ARVN'S (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) were getting drunk as hell. I also noticed that there were airplanes, I mean WWII type prop jobs making bombing runs not far from us. Vietnam was a noisy place and it was hard to hear the bombs explode.

We approached this large building, and according to our directions we had received from the vets, this was it. It was a dirty building with bullet holes every where.

"Look at all of those bullet holes, And we don't even have weapons." I said in an angry voice.

Inside the building there were a many other GI's that looked as if they had been in country for a while. A sergeant approached us and said.

"Where the hell are you guys from."

"We were told we could spend the night here." I said.

"The 936th Vet Detachment sent us here." Bert said.

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"There are some empty bunks up stairs. Just roll the mattress back up when you leave." The sergeant replied.

"We might be here for eleven or so days and will need some linen," Jimmy Powrzasas said.

"Look troop you are in the Nam and we don't have any thing like sheets here." The sergeant replied and walked off laughing mumbling "fucking new guys."

Some of the nicer guys began to tell us where we could get chow, and filled us in on the current situation at the barracks. Later that night we stood leaning out the big windows of the second floor and could see tracers of all colors that were coming from fire fights, and after dark we could hear all the firing all around us as we watched the dive bombers from another war bomb no more than three miles away. We were the only persons on the second floor, which was good.

I soon settled down to write home and I had to mention to my dad that I was really worried about not having a weapon. I explained that we could see fighting going on not more than three miles away.

As I lay there in bed exhausted from the long flight, unloading and moving our equipment, and taking care of the dogs. I was really stressed out about the way things were looking. This is only the first day and it was already bad, I thought as I exhaustedly fell asleep.