

## CHAPTER ONE

Many U.S. Army personnel began their journey to South Vietnam from the Overseas Processing Terminal in Oakland, California. It was 1970, and just outside the compound, hundreds of hippies and former soldiers picketed and protested against the war. They targeted those soldiers who were dropped off by cabs and heading toward the main gate. Dozens of Military Police officers (MP's) were holding the protesters at bay and created a clear path through the mob. The crowd tossed flowers at the passing soldiers and chanted loudly for peace.

Some in the group pleaded with the new arrivals, trying to convince them to quit the military and refuse to fight in the war. Most soldiers passed through the gates without hesitation; however, a few did stop on occasion to seriously reconsider their options. John Kowalski had passed through the main gate earlier in the day and was wandering through the massive facility, a converted airplane hangar, in search of friends from his Advanced Infantry Training (AIT) Platoon at Fort Polk, Louisiana. The entire training company had received orders for Vietnam, and each person was to report there after a thirty-day leave.

The PFC was maneuvering his six-foot frame through a maze of cubicles. The rubber soles of his newly acquired combat boots squeaked loudly as he crossed through these quiet sections. An earlier coat of wax on the red tile floor also made it appear wet and slippery; John stepped along cautiously as if walking on ice.

The twenty-foot-by-twenty-foot cubicles comprised of eight-foot high pieces of plywood and two-by-fours rose up toward the thirty-foot ceiling. Each of these enclosures held a dozen bunk beds; sleeping youths occupied many while awaiting their turn to fly off to war. His efforts to find a familiar face within the maze were unsuccessful, so he began a quarter-mile hike to the other side of the building, which was set aside for recreation. He found the area to be quite active and noisy compared to the morgue-like atmosphere he had just left. Here, there were hundreds of highly enthused soldiers, all dressed in jungle fatigues – the green machine! Rows of pool and Ping-Pong tables cluttered the area, but were barely visible through the crowd. It was obvious that many of the players were having difficulty with their games, the close proximity of the many spectators inhibiting their movements. John stood on the outskirts looking in. He removed his olive green baseball cap and ran his hand over the light brown stubble length of hair. Satisfied that it was again growing, he replaced the cap and traced a line across the rough four-inch long scar on the left side of his neck - the consequence of a confrontation with some escaped felons during Basic Training. His hazel eyes continued to scan the many faces, hoping to spot someone he knew. Suddenly, a player on a nearby Ping-Pong table backed up quickly to return a hard serve from his opponent. He tripped over a spectator, creating a domino effect on the group standing behind him. A young soldier, who looked fifteen at most, found himself sprawled out on top of the adjacent pool table. The remaining balls were scattered, some falling to the floor along with a stack of ten-dollar bills. All of this happened as an African-American soldier, twice the kid's size, was preparing to take an advantageous shot. He became enraged. "You dumb motherfucker! I had this game in the bag."

"It wasn't my fault," the kid cried out in a shaky voice, "I got pushed up here by those other guys," he pointed to those soldiers standing around the Ping-Pong table.

“Pushed, my ass,” the black soldier challenged, “you just cost me a hundred bucks. So pay me what I lost, and I’ll let you slide.”

“I don’t have that kind of money,” the skinny kid replied, climbing down from the table.

“Let me see your wallet, and I’ll take what I think is fair,” the behemoth threatened, reaching behind the kid to snatch the wallet from his back pocket.

The kid pushed back into the crowd, attempting to escape the reach of the thoroughly pissed off Army private.

“It was an accident!” he hollered. You’re not taking my wallet!”

The crowd tightened, everyone shifting to find the best-unobstructed view of the altercation. Trapped, the kid had no place to go.

“Come on brothers, are you with me?” The soldier called out to a group of black comrades standing nearby. “This white boy owes me some money!”

His supporters wielded cue sticks and pool balls and moved toward the petrified youth.

A group of white soldiers took a step forward, ushering the young kid behind the pack and quickly engulfing him. One of them stated in a southern drawl, “Why don’t you boys pick on somebody your own size?”

Hearing this, the leader of the black group turned to his followers and said giddily, “I guess we have to kick a whole lot of white ass to get my money.”

“Yeah, let’s do it. We’re with you!” his followers chanted.

Individuals within the black group were now beating the palms of their hands with the thick end of the cue sticks and lofting pool balls lightly into the air. Two of them broke ranks and moved toward the white group.

Suddenly, a dozen MP’s forced their way through the crowd before either of the two groups could strike a blow.

“Let’s break this shit up!” The MP Sergeant ordered, separating soldiers, and shoving them out of his way. He stopped, facing the leader of the black group. “What is this all about?” he asked.

“That skinny white boy owes me a hundred bucks!” The black private protested, pointing out the alleged culprit. “All I want is to get my money back and these white boys want to come over and start some shit with us.”

“That’s bullshit, sarge,” the southern soldier responded. “There was an accident. The kid fell on the pool table and fucked up their game. He doesn’t owe him shit.”

“Is that correct, private?” The sergeant fixed a deep, piercing stare at the kid.

“Yes, sergeant,” he replied in a trembling voice, “there was a lot of shuffling and pushing behind me. I found myself sprawled out on top of the pool table. I couldn’t help myself.”

“That’s a damn lie!” The black soldier protested. “I couldn’t give a fuck about the game; I’m pissed because he pocketed my money during all the commotion.”

“I don’t think he has the balls to do something like that,” the sergeant replied after sizing him up. “I’d be willing to forget this incident if everybody would just walk away and return to what they were doing.”

“What are you going to do if we don’t? Send us to Vietnam?” a voice called out from the crowd.

The taunt was enough to change the atmosphere of the group and some began to laugh and snicker.

“Yeah, you’ll still go to Vietnam, but you may spend a few weeks in our stockade first,” the sergeant growled.

The crowd started to disperse, and soldiers moved away, resuming their activities from before the interruption. The black soldier shifted back and forth from one foot to the other, his expression changing as he tried to compose himself.

The MP Sergeant looked at him. "Well, what's it going to be?"

"I'll let it go, man. I don't need any bad time on my record. I want to serve my year and get back home."

"Then, do I have your word that you won't bother these guys anymore?"

"Yeah, man, you got my word." He turned and walked back to the pool table and his waiting friends. The kid had vanished.

Once everything was back to normal, John turned and moved toward yet another undiscovered part of the large building. After a few minutes, he heard a familiar voice call out, "Hey, Polack!"

He stopped and looked around for the source.

"Hey, Polack, over here," a tall, lanky soldier with red hair, freckles, and a broad, toothy grin called out again. He was pushing through the crowd and waving frantically.

John's face lit up in recognition, returning the man's wave with a wild one of his own.

"Bill," he called loudly after seeing his close friend from training.

They embraced warmly like long-lost relatives.

"Polack, you son of a bitch, am I ever glad to see you." Bill, as gaunt as a scarecrow, slapped John's back a few times.

"I am too, Bill. How the hell are you?"

"I'm good. When did you get here?"

"About four hours ago. What about you?"

"I got here yesterday."

"Why did you come so early, Bill? Didn't they have a flight available when you needed it?"

"I didn't fly. I took a train instead."

"You rode a train all the way here from Tennessee? Are you shitting me?"

"Nope, I've never been on a plane in my whole life, Bill admitted sheepishly. I was so afraid of the thought of flying that I checked into the train schedule and found that I had to leave a couple of days earlier to get here on time."

"How did you get home from Fort Polk?"

"I rode in by bus."

"Damn Bill, you missed out on three days of your leave just because you're afraid of flying?"

"Yeah, I know, I know. Don't remind me."

"Now you don't have a choice. There aren't any trains or buses that go to Vietnam."

"I know and thought hard about that on the way here. I've got a perfect solution – I'll get drunk and pass out. That way, somebody could carry me on board."

"Maybe they can just give you a shot or something to relax."

"No thanks. I've had enough shots for now! Once I got here, they gave me a worse physical than the one I had to take when the Army first called me up. Here, they move you along like an assembly line."

"I know what you mean. And that paper work was really a bummer - there must have been twenty-five forms to fill out!"

Bill produced a wide smile, "Yeah. That part took me almost an hour."

The two young men commiserated about the humiliating experience of having to strip down to their underwear and stand in long lines of strangers from all over the country—herded along like cattle.

“What did you think when you saw the ten doctors on each side of the line giving everyone shots with those air-powered guns?”

“I didn’t have time to think. I just blindly followed everyone else and hoped for the best.”

“A guy in front of me moved his arm just as the doctor pulled the trigger,” Bill commented. “When the blood squirted out, I almost shit myself.”

“The shots weren’t too bad - kind of felt like a punch in the arm. But, as I’m standing here now, they’re starting to ache pretty damn bad,” John said.

“It’ll feel better in a few hours. I feel fine today,” Bill volunteered.

“The thing I didn’t like was having to ship all our own clothes and stuff home. What a hassle! And these new jungle fatigues and boots we’re in are just like those in basic training.”

“Yeah, but it was all worth it. Don’t we look good?” Bill asked, striking a pose.

John would not have been more surprised if Bill’s ball cap came off his head and twirled in the air by itself. Bill flexed his arms and posed like a body builder in the final pose of a competition. His head quivered as he strained his muscles. Bill’s face was stern and solemn as he concentrated on this show of strength.

John suddenly burst out laughing “Damn Bill, what was all that about? It looked like an advertisement for Scarecrows Incorporated.” He stopped chuckling before continuing, “All you needed was a bit of hay sticking out in the right places, and you’d have nailed it.” John pointed to Bill’s face, “I especially like how you managed to cover your front teeth with your lower lip. You did look scary, but it also seemed like you had a mouth full of snuff.”

“Okay. Okay. You’ve had your fun for the day, Polack.” Bill looked more hurt than embarrassed. Bill Sayers, raised in the back woods of Tennessee, spoke with a heavy southern drawl. He was the third eldest of nine children who shared everything from chores to clothes while growing up on the family farm. He had never experienced the feeling of receiving new clothes—all he had ever worn were hand-me-downs from his older brothers. When the Army issued him the first five sets of new fatigues, he treated them as if they were made of gold.

“C’mon Bill. I’m just giving you a hard time and didn’t mean anything by it.” John wrapped his arm over his buddy’s shoulder and pulled him tightly. “You have to admit - it was funny as hell!”

Both men shared a hearty laugh.

“Have you found a bunk yet?” Bill asked.

“Not yet.”

“Great, then come with me, I have a cubicle all to myself.”

“Lead the way.”

John followed Bill to the other side of the building and then through the maze of cubicles for another ten minutes before reaching the smaller room with six bunk beds.

“Looks like it’ll be nice and quiet here.”

“Shit, it is now. Yesterday, you couldn’t hear yourself think.”

“And why was that?” John inquired.

“I had to share this cube with ten other guys who have been together since Basic Training. All they did was party the whole night.”

“What happened to them?”

“They left on the first flight this morning. So I guess it’s just you and me until new neighbors move in.”

“I’m okay with that. Have you seen anyone else from our AIT Platoon yet?”

“Yeah, matter of fact, yesterday, I bumped into Joel McCray and Larry Nickels. Do you remember them?”

“I do. Where are they?”

“They left this morning with those other guys. And you’ll never believe who else was with them.”

“Who?”

“Sergeant Holmes.”

“No shit? I thought he was returning to Fort Polk this week to start training a new platoon of recruits.”

“That was his original plan, but he had his orders changed during his leave and volunteered for a second tour.”

“Why did he do a fool thing like that?”

“He told me that he was fed up with the civilians and all the hippies. He said that while he was on leave, people spit on him and got into his face yelling that he was teaching soldiers to be baby killers and then sending them off to Vietnam. He said there was not a day gone by without somebody picking a fight with him. After the cops had jailed him for the second time for disorderly conduct, he went and signed the papers.”

“The world is filled with jerks. Too bad, he had to volunteer for Nam to get away from it all. Did you know he was wounded during his first tour?” John asked.

“Yeah, I remember him telling the story about that big Tet offensive in ‘68. He got some shrapnel in his back from a mortar round, but also said that the fighting is not at the same level as it was in 1968 or earlier, so we all have a good chance of making it home in one piece.”

“I hope that’s true.”

In the AIT Company, everyone liked Bill because he always had something good to say about others. Stories told about life in the big cities fascinated him to no end. It was difficult for him to imagine doing things that many city folks took for granted as part of their everyday lives.

He walked everywhere, including the three miles each way to school and back. In fact, the first time Bill had ever ridden a bike was in the Army.

Bill and John became very close while serving together in the Army. They had developed a friendship that made it easy to confide in one another on sensitive issues. John had promised to visit Bill in the hills of Tennessee one day, but only if Bill agreed to visit him in Detroit. Bill was ecstatic and could not wait; he continued to remind John periodically of this agreement.

All the excitement of the day was beginning to take its toll. Both were tired and struggling to stay awake.

“I had it rough last night.” John began, “My mother gave me a going away party yesterday. All of my close friends and relatives were there. After dinner, we all sat in the living room and talked while the news was on TV. Everyone quieted down when a

bulletin came on from Vietnam. It seems some outfit ran into an ambush. They showed helicopters burning. Dead and wounded soldiers were carried past the camera, and the commentator sounded so nervous. The women looked over at me and started crying. They all ran over and hugged me.”

“Damn,” Bill said with a sympathetic look upon his face.

“Well you know me.” John continued, “I put on the brave act and told them that nothing was going to happen to me while I was in Vietnam. I told them that we’d all be back in this same living room in a year to laugh off those worries.”

“What happened then?”

“Everyone started to leave for home before it got too emotional. When everyone left, I went up to my bedroom and tried to sleep, but just couldn’t. I kept thinking about that news story and got all shaky and nervous.”

“Polack, you aren’t alone in that feeling. I’m scared too.”

Both sat quietly for a few moments.

John lay back on his bunk and glanced to his watch. It was 3:30 in the morning. He thought about everything that had happened since leaving Detroit only fifteen hours earlier. Everything seemed to be “hurry-up-and-wait.”

On the flight to California, he had been the only military passenger. The flight attendants and fellow passengers had made him feel special. When they heard he was en route to Vietnam, they bought him drinks, offered him magazines and candy, and wished him luck on his tour. He was very proud and felt honored by the way he was treated. His fellow passengers respected him, and not one person had treated him as Sergeant Holmes had been treated.

“Hey Polack, get your lazy ass out of that bunk!” Bill shook him a few times.

Startled, John jumped up from the bed quickly, bumping his head on the frame of the upper bunk.

“Damn you, Bill, you scared the shit out of me,” he grumbled, rubbing the top of his head.

John looked at his watch and noted that it was 1330 hours.

“Jesus, Bill, its one-thirty. When did you get up?”

Bill looked at his watch, “about six hours ago.”

“Why didn’t you get me up sooner?”

“Hell, I’d have been wasting my time. I know you city boys like your sleep. You would sleep all day long if somebody let you. Besides, it wasn’t necessary for both of us to check the shipping manifest for today.”

“What did you find out?”

“Both of our names are listed, and we’re leaving for Vietnam at ten o’clock tonight.”

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## CHAPTER TWO

“This is your captain speaking,” the voice announced on the public address system within the Pan American jet, “we will be landing in Bien Hoa, South Vietnam, in about forty minutes. They are reporting sunny skies, temperatures of 97 degrees and 100% humidity.”

Whoops and cheers erupted from the military passengers. “Welcome to Hell,” someone called out. The captain continued, “As you know, we’ve passed through several time zones since leaving California, so let me take this opportunity to get you all up to date.

First, there is a time difference of thirty-one hours between Vietnam and the west coast of the United States. For example, in Oakland where many of you started your journey, it is 8:30 on Friday morning. And right now in Vietnam, it's Saturday, August seventh, and 4:30 in the afternoon."

Again, some comments referring to a time machine and blasting into the future echoed from the rear seats.

"After we touch down, we're asking everyone to remain in their seats until the plane comes to a complete stop. There will be no need to panic and rush for the doors as this airport is in one of the more secure areas of South Vietnam. It is very safe where we are landing and nobody is in danger. So sit back, relax, and enjoy the scenery.

"On behalf of the crew, we hope you have enjoyed your flight. We do wish you the best of luck while you are here in Vietnam, and God's speed for a safe return home. Thank you for flying Pan American Airlines."

"Yeah right, like we had a choice," one of the soldiers uttered loudly to his companion across the aisle.

John was looking at his watch and trying to do the math in his head. "Bill, do you know it took us almost twenty-six hours to get here?"

"Hard to believe isn't it? You may also want to think about us being on the other side of the world from Tennessee. It just blows my mind."

"I thought China was on the other side. Didn't you ever hear people say that if you dug straight down in your backyard, you'd end up in China?"

"Who is going to do a damn fool thing like that?"

"Nobody is. It's just a saying that I grew up with."

"You city folk have some strange notions about things!" Bill returned to watch the scenery passing below the cabin window, hoping to see something more than just clouds and ocean.

Prior to leaving Oakland, an Army Doctor had given Bill some tranquilizers to take prior to departure. On the first leg to Hawaii, he sat in a half-comatose state in the window seat next to John. The effects had worn off an hour before landing in Hawaii, and after fully regaining his senses, Bill found flying to be rather enjoyable. He would tell everyone that his favorite part of flying was the takeoff, and how he enjoyed the same sensation as the astronauts must have felt when they left for the moon.

During this long flight, he had spent most of the time looking out the window, enchanted by the view from that height. It was a new world to him, and he savored every minute. Bill grabbed John by the arm and pulled him toward the window. "Look, Polack, you can see land," he said excitedly.

John leaned over Bill's legs to see for himself. The word spread quickly and everyone started crowding the windows for their first look at their destination. After flying over water most of the time, it was a pleasure to see land below. From fifteen-thousand feet, Vietnam appeared as a vat of shimmering colors. Bright blue threads snaked through shades of green, brown, and yellow-colored earth. A large mountain chain was visible in the distant northwest and seemed to cut the country in half. It became quiet throughout the cabin as the laughter, talking and singing suddenly ended. The steady roar of four jet engines continued but was unnoticed as every passenger fixated on the scenery unfolding below.

As the altitude of the plane gradually dropped, the vistas below changed in shape, color,

and became more recognizable. Soon, the sprawling city of Saigon and its neighboring villages took shape and grew in size as the jet approached and flew overhead. Cars and trucks appeared as they inched along the roads. On the final approach for landing, the tiny, ant-like moving dots took the shape of thousands of people moving about.

The plane landed smoothly and taxied toward the terminal. A few moments later, it stopped abruptly and the engines began their dying throes. There was an absolute hush on the plane, and the rapid heartbeats of two-hundred new arrivals hammered in unison.

Suddenly, a loud noise erupted in the front of the plane when the cabin door slid open.

Everyone on board was fidgeting about, trying to get a better look at the doorway.

An Air Force Major walked through the opening; he was dressed in his best Class-A uniform with several rows of battle ribbons proudly displayed over his left breast.

Following him inside were two Army Captains, dressed in green jungle fatigues and baseball caps. The trio walked up the aisle, stopping at the forward flight attendant station. They stood for a moment, surveying the new arrivals. The major stepped to the side, lifting the microphone from the mounting plate on the wall.

“My name is Major Brown and joining me are Captains Willis and Sharkey. We welcome you to Bien Hoa Air Force Base in the Republic of South Vietnam.” All eyes fixed upon the major as they listened intently.

“Our job today is to get you men off this plane, through Customs, and finally loaded onto buses that will transport you to the Reception Center. We want to complete this portion of your in-country training safely and in an orderly manner. After disembarking this aircraft, I expect to see everyone joined up and standing in four perfect ranks out on the tarmac. When we are certain that everyone is present, we will then proceed to the baggage area inside the civilian terminal. There, you will secure your duffel bags and proceed directly to the area marked ‘Customs’. The officials will have you empty the contents of your bags onto counters and perform a search of your body. The MP’s will be looking for drugs and any other illegal contraband that you may be trying to smuggle into the country.”

At that moment, many soldiers exhibited some nervousness. Some frowned and rolled their eyes. Others stirred anxiously in their seats with a panicked look upon their faces. The major continued, “If anyone is concealing contraband, then I strongly suggest you drop it in your seats as you leave this aircraft. There will be no questions and nobody will come looking for you afterwards. This is also your only warning. Once outside, there are no second chances. If arrested, we will take you to LBJ – which is Long Binh Jail for you Cherries. There, I can guarantee you will serve some hard time for your foolishness.

“When you clear through Customs, you will then exit the terminal and board the awaiting buses. They will transport you to the 90th Replacement Center in Long Binh, which is about a three-mile drive. There, you will begin final in- processing and assigned to your new in-country unit.

“At this time, I would ask that all officers aboard, please stand up and begin to disembark at the front door.”

As they moved up the aisle way, John and Bill noticed a few items left behind on the seats. Bags of weed, pills, and other unidentifiable items lay openly or tucked between cushions. Bill and John shuffled down the aisle toward the front of the plane. “Look at this stuff.

Do you think these people carried it with them all the way from Oakland? I seem to recall that some of us were searched before getting on the plane.”

“No, I don’t think so, Bill. It would have been too risky in Oakland. The guys must’ve bought this stuff during our three stops along the way. There were a lot of shady characters in those terminals, and I remember seeing a lot of money flashed around.”

“You’re right, now that you mentioned it. I can remember overhearing some people talking on our stopover in Guam. They were talking about having a big party once they settled into their new digs, but I didn’t think it would be with grass and drugs.”

“Shit, Bill, dope users are on the rise. This stuff is getting really popular back home and more people than we know are turning to it. Just give me a beer or a mixed drink and my cigarettes and I’ll be happy.”

“I’m with you there, partner. I wonder if anybody is going to try and smuggle some dope into the country.”

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

Each person walked out of the air-conditioned plane, hesitating briefly on the top step of the boarding ramp as the full impact of hot and humid air engulfed him. For a moment, it was difficult to breathe. Some made a feeble attempt to re-enter the plane, but the rush of exiting personnel pushed them back out.

There was a green hue outside as rays of silvery sunlight reflected from everything colored olive drab green: helicopters, planes, gun emplacements, and buildings with sandbagged walls surrounding them.

Dozens of helicopters were lifting off and landing in areas next to the runway. Small green, single-seat Piper Cub airplanes and larger Phantom Fighter jets were also moving about and taxiing toward different areas of the airport to wait in lines for their takeoff.

Bill and John cleared Customs easily and walked out to the waiting buses. The vehicles were identical to those used during training on the American bases and were painted olive green like everything else around, with one distinct difference - there were no glass windows. Instead, bars and chicken wire covered each framed opening.

The two close friends took a seat in the first row behind the driver.

“Why is all this shit covering the windows instead of having glass?” John asked the driver.

“It’s there to protect the passengers from grenades or any other foreign objects that might be thrown in from the side of the road,” he answered.

“Protect the occupants? It gives me the feeling of being a criminal on the way to prison.”

“We are in prison, my man,” the person behind John said with a smile. “Think about it. We’re all locked up in this country for the next year and there’s nothing we can do about it but serve our time.”

“Yeah, you right!” Some of the other passengers agreed.

Once the buses loaded, the drivers closed the door and started the engine.

Two MP jeeps pulled alongside, stopping next to the lead bus. Each had long fifteen-foot whip antennas swinging from the two rear corners and dual M-60 machine guns mounted to a cross bar behind the front seats. The soldier standing behind the guns was busy loading them and ensuring they were in proper working order while the other guy talked casually into the handset of the radio.

“Look at the Rat Patrol jeeps!” John exclaimed.

“What’s a Rat Patrol jeep?” Bill asked.

“Don’t you remember seeing them on TV when we were young? They were always kicking the shit out of the Germans in Africa during the Second World War.”

“You know I never had a TV,” Bill said quietly.

“Oh yeah, I forgot. Just take my word for it, Bill - they were a bad ass outfit.”

The procession of five buses began to move, and both gun jeeps raced to the head of the line and fell in. As the convoy picked up speed, red dust from the road swirled through the air, making it difficult to breathe - the horrible residue immediately coating everything. As if on cue, the new arrivals began choking and gasping for clean air. The passengers quickly pulled out handkerchiefs or used shirts to cover noses and mouths in an attempt to filter some breathable air from the thick red fog.

The convoy appeared to be traveling through a corridor. Both sides of the road had a ten-foot high barbed wire fence running alongside. Hundreds of small, straw-roofed huts, about the size of a single room lakeside cabin in the states, stood as far back as they could see. The barbed wire fences made it appear as if the area was either a prison or a refugee center.

Every person they passed appeared to be very old. Some were in front of their huts, sitting on the ground or cooking over open fires. Others simply stood near the fence and watched the parade of buses pass; every one of them was chewing something and spitting a brown liquid onto the ground.

“Those people are all chewing tobacco!” Bill exclaimed.

“That’s not tobacco,” the driver volunteered, “it’s the juice from betel and nuts.”

“What the hell are betel and nuts?” John asked.

“The Areca nut grows wild in the husks of some trees around the country. These people cure the nut and slice it into sections. For chewing, they wrap a few slices in betel leaf and add a lime, cloves or anything else to improve the bitter taste. When taken like that, the stimulant causes a hot sensation in the body and heightened alertness, although the effects vary from person to person. However, most of them mix other shit with it to get high, too.”

“You mean like dope?” Bill asked the driver.

“Yeah, exactly like dope. Most of these people are high all the time. They wouldn’t be able to stand it otherwise.”

“Just look at all those folks by the wire. They remind me of the cows back home, all of them standing along the fence and chewing their cud. Their heads turn as you pass and they keep watching you until you are long gone.”

The driver laughed, “That’s original.”

The convoy approached a tight right turn, and each bus slowed to complete the maneuver. Several groups of villagers were standing at the corner waiting for the traffic to clear. Just then,

John grabbed Bill by the arm and pointed out the window. “Bill, take a look at that!”

Speechless, they continued to stare at the sight greeting them.

A group of seven women, each appearing to be close to a hundred years old, was standing on a corner, waving to the buses as they passed. Their wrinkles were deep and wide, their skin dark and shriveled like prunes. It appeared that most were heading home after working in the fields, since they were carrying rakes, hoes, and shovels. Two of them balanced long poles on

their shoulders with large bamboo baskets attached to each end. They are wore black nylon pants and oversized shirts, covered with dried mud and stains. All of them wore straw conical hats that helped to shield their faces from the strong rays of the sun, and they were all smiling broadly. Many were toothless or had only a few teeth left in their mouths. All looked as if they had mouths filled with black licorice. Their lips, gums, teeth, and insides of their mouth looked like posters from the Cancer Foundation, warning against the dangers of smoking.

“That’s what happens when you chew those betel nuts all your life,” the driver explained. Bill and John could only look at each other and shake their heads in disbelief.

“Daaaaaaaaaaaamnnnnn!” John finally said in one long drawn out breath.

Further up the road, young children were everywhere. Most were small boys of pre-school age.

“Hey GI, you souvenir me cigarettes, candy, you numba one,” they called, running along the side of the road to keep up with the buses.

Some of the people on the bus felt sorry for them and began flicking cigarettes through the chicken wire windows. This resulted in several scuffles as each group began to zero in on the tossed tobacco sticks, fighting each other to claim the prizes.

In the background, behind the packs of fighting boys, stood the little girls, not any older than eight years or so. Some held half-naked babies in their arms and others shouted at the fighting youths. A few of them even entered the fracas and began to pull the boys apart, appearing to scold them.

“Why are all the little girls holding babies?” John asked the driver.

“Those little girls help raise the family, cook, and clean around the hut while their parents work in the fields.”

“That’s so sad,” both responded together.

Every human being passed so far on the convoy was either old or very young. There were no teenage boys hanging around on the corners, no young or middle-aged men walking around in the villages.

At another turn, the buses slowed down again. One corner had a small outpost shaped like a triangle. Large bunkers were at each corner of the complex; machine gun barrels poked through several of the gun slits. A twenty-foot high tower and spotlight stood guard in the center of the compound. Loops of barbed wire and walls of sandbags encircled the small base. Overall, about twenty Vietnamese soldiers moved about the compound. It was unlikely that any of them weighed more than a hundred pounds.

“Look at those guys; they’re only kids.”

“Shit, Bill, we’re not much older ourselves.”

“Yeah, but we can put in our year and go home. These poor guys probably live up the road apiece and will have to continue fighting this war long after we’re gone.”

“I guess you’re right, Bill. I just can’t imagine having to fight a war in my own neighborhood back home. It’s got to be hard keeping focused on a day-to-day basis when you don’t know if your property will still be there, or if your family is okay after a fire. What a life of hell!”

Five minutes later, the bus made a left turn and slowed to a crawl as it approached a gate straddling the road. It reminded the young soldiers of Fort Apache, as portrayed in old western movies. A sign over the gate read, “Welcome to the 90th Replacement Battalion - Long Binh”.