1976

Aphoristic Dogma

George Michael Gratzer

The University of Montana

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APHORISTIC DOGMA

By

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B. A., University of Montana, 1963

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for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

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1976

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Chairman, Board of Examiners

Dean, Graduate School

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"This captain had the familiar gaiety, the devil-may-care spirit which is such an attractive characteristic of the true regular officer. 'We were born for war,' it seems to say, 'and we only live when we are fighting.'"

Alexander Solzhenitsyn
August 1914

"Fighting induces fear, but fighting in war produces emotion which goes beyond fear. There are those who know, who are inescapably involved; they are going to be killed or seriously wounded."

George M. Gratzer

"War is the only place where a man really (sic) lives."

George S. Patton, Jr.
The Patton Papers
"In marching, in mobs, in football games, and in war, outlines become vague; real things become unreal and a fog creeps over the mind. Tension and excitement, weariness, movement - all merge in one great gray dream, so that when it is over, it is hard to remember how it was when you killed men or ordered them to be killed. Then other people who were not there tell you what it was like and you say vaguely, 'yes, I guess that's how it was.'"

John Steinbeck
The Moon Is Down

"I feel more like I do now than I did when I first got here."

Douglas F. Brown
A friend who died

"Rain, mud, shit, or blood, I'll be there."

Robert W. Clark
A friend who died

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work is dedicated to those who understand. It is especially dedicated to my wife, Janet, who understands more than anyone, and who has done most of my manuscript typing, and to my offspring, Kurt, Dana, Mike, and Rachel, who suffer my lack of sympathy and compassion. It is also dedicated to dead friends who always did understand.

All characters and incidents in this work are fictional except, of course, for the New Journalism account, and any resemblance to persons living or dead is coincidental. The New Journalism account will have to suffer any consequences.
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PART I
SELECTED SHORT STORIES AND POEMS
NIGHT CACOETHES

Anselmo rode easily, enjoying the warmth of the sun after weeks of endless rain. He didn't know where the unit was going but it seemed unimportant. The phrase "Ride, Ghost Rider, Ride!" winged through his mind. His thoughts were uninterrupted by the usual noise of the armored personnel carriers grinding invidiously into the innocent laterite beneath their tracks, and dust, the usual smothering dry season dust, failed to rise in revenge for ending its sleep.

Anselmo looked at the panoramic beauty of the countryside, its entirety viewed in a mere glance. The trees were lush and green from the monsoon season.

As Anselmo looked about contentedly, the landscape suddenly changed. There was no scenery, no lushness of foliage, no panoramic beauty, no color. Suddenly there was nothing enjoyable about the ride. Noise from the carriers became evident, then intensified, drowning out even the radio traffic through his helmet's head-set. There were no leaves on the trees and the countryside lay exposed leaving nothing at all to behold.

A figure stared at Anselmo from a tree. Anselmo tried to yell instructions to his driver through the inter-com but the radio sound was gone and Foley continued driving, even
after turning and smiling slyly at Anselmo. The figure in
the tree was exposed in barren branches, the only creature
in the trees, the only living thing to be seen, except the
endless column of carriers. Anselmo turned his rifle on
the figure, for it held a gun with a barrel of gigantic pro-
portions, almost too large for the small figure to hold.

Anselmo felt the first of thousands of stings as the
figure loosened a hail of tiny bullets which zipped incon-
gruously from the large bore. The stream of bullets was
traced green and it moved through Anselmo's body easily,
leaving only a stinging sensation. Anselmo yelled but sound
was still absent. The carriers gained momentum, seemed to
gather speed, but they failed to move. The tracks were
churning without propelling the vehicle, riding on a cloud
of red dust which now rose from the hard surface.

The figure smiled at Anselmo and continued to fire its
hail of tiny bullets. Anselmo emptied magazines into the
figure without effect, reloading quickly, emptying again,
reloading, emptying, without toppling the smiling figure
with his endless supply of spiraling green tracers. Un-
accountably the column of carriers spun and converged on the
figure in the barren tree; .50's, M60's, M16's, M79's and
45's all were being fired point-blank into the figure, each
round hitting its mark, but without effect. The figure
smiled his mindless smile and continued to fire only at
Anselmo. Green tracers kept stinging him, stinging him,
stinging him, stinging, stinging, stinging, stinging,
"What's wrong, sir? Wake up, sir, wake up! What's wrong?"

Anselmo woke scratching his body, jerked up on his cot, and bumped into his driver, Teddy Foley. Anselmo looked around the interior of his vehicle.

"Are there red ants in this goddam track? I itch all over. What the hell is it?"

"I think you were just dreaming," Foley answered. "Are you all right now?"

"Yeah, I'm fine, Foley. Thanks."

Anselmo swung his legs to the side of the cot, slid into his trousers, and walked off the end of the ramp and pissed, staring into the night. He sat on his cot again and wondered what had disturbed him. Something about trees, bare ones, and tracers. What the hell bit him? He could still feel the itching sensation he had when he woke. He lit a smoke and his ears tuned in on the incessant far off Grump Grump Grump of harassing and interdicting volleys being fired throughout the zone. Sleep was finished for the night.
WATCHING BIRDS DIE

A leafless Mountain Ash
points gnarled fingers
toward reverse-mirrored windows.

From the tree . . . springboard for flight,
for berry-drunk Wax Wing's flight . . .
birds die to pierce my living room.
He sat inside the armored personnel carrier slowly sipping the iced tea Chop Chop 6, the mess steward, had made for him. "Chop Chop" had been informally assigned by someone in the company. He let the thought slip from his mind as he began to monitor a radio message between his battalion commander and the TOC. The tactical operation center served as a kind of nerve center for the unit, and its competence level was geared to the competence of whoever happened to be manning the radios. The CO's message was of little import to anyone except the TOC and to himself. He heard only part of the message "... to Bravo's perimeter to see Bandit 6. My pilot will monitor for me when I land, over."

"This is Taurus X-ray, roger, out."

Bandit 6 was aware of what went on within the battalion. And he knew that Taurus 6 wouldn't give him a call to let him know that he was landing. He was expected to monitor the net, it was all part of the game.

He tossed off the tea, grabbed his rifle and other gear, and told his driver that he was going to meet LTC Hackett. He slid into the seat of his 3/4-ton, placed his rifle across his lap, and started the engine. The jeep was used sparingly and he preferred to drive himself.
He pulled through the zig-zag entrance to the night defensive perimeter, which was designed to confuse the enemy at night, and in doing so he raised thick dust to his rear. Because of the zig-zag he had to drive through the stuff. He nearly drove into the concertina. Three rows were established at intervals of forty meters and each row was three levels high, laid in a 3-2-1 fashion, providing a real obstacle to anyone desiring uninvited entrance. Each NDP in the 1st Division area was designed in the same manner and it had taken more than a month to complete all ten of them that many months before. Evidence of the reason for the name - Thunder Road - was visible everywhere. Rusted APC hulls, twisted railroad track, torn jungle, and pock-marked ground.

His arrival at the landing pad outside the perimeter coincided with his boss's landing. He pulled the jeep off the road and walked to meet Taurus 6. It was rather comical to salute Hackett because each of them seemed to be playing a game while accomplishing this small military greeting. One or the other would watch the horizon, chopper blades, or anything else visible upon approaching each other. There had been a time when they had angrily confronted one another as staff officers in the same unit. They were good friends now, or at least they had a good working relationship. Out-ranked, Bandit 6 was first to salute and greet the other man. 

"Howdy, sir." A slight smile crossed the face of the battalion CO, a face that had a hair-lip attached to it.

"Afternoon, Mike. Any problems?"
None, except that he disliked the particular job he had at the moment. It consisted of clearing the road each morning with mine-detectors and outposting with troops and armored vehicles to allow passage of convoys twice a day. He disliked it even though it meant more rest for the company. It meant that he did not usually have to take walks through the jungle looking for bad guys. Working the woods was drudgery, as well as dangerous. Finally, Mike was admitting to himself that he was scared after months of search and destroy operations. He didn't say that to his boss. Instead he said, "How long are we going to stay on this road operation?" He said that and he wondered why. He didn't like what he was doing on the highway, but it was easy work and there was very little danger involved since the road had been opened for weeks. He was instantly sorry because he thought Taurus 6 would translate the remark to mean that he wanted to chase through the jungle after VC. Christ, that wasn't the case at all. What he really wanted was to take R & R in Hawaii to meet his wife. He had been saving money to surprise her, but he knew the time wasn't right to ask for that privilege. He was a company commander and that in itself was reason enough not to ask.

"We'll probably be here another six-seven days it looks like. I'm going to have you leave this NDP tomorrow. You'll move south to Chan Tanh. You'll clear and outpost as usual, but have this area cleared prior to that. Take all your equipment with you. When the last convoy moves through,
follow it to Thor 5. Terra will have a company moved in here before you leave. Your company will remain intact, but to defend Thor 5, I'm attaching the Recon Platoon to you as well as Tyro Bravo's tank platoon. We'll also have a change in ambush procedure but I'll talk with you about that tomorrow. The S-3 is working the plans out now. 29 will contact you as soon as he gets off the road, which will be just after you arrive at Chan Tahn. Tyro's platoon is commanded by a SSG Harper and he'll be attached to us effective noon tomorrow."

"What piece of the road will we have?"

"I'm trying to work out a series of search and destroy operations for you, but so far it looks like I'll have to put you on the road between Thor 5 and Thor 6."

"That's more than I can handle without extending myself unnecessarily. Will I have the Armored platoon to use?"

"Yes, but don't worry. We think we'll have to outpost half-days for the next three days. You can handle that."

"We'll be skinny, but for short periods it won't make much difference. Where will we S & D?"

"That thick patch just to the east of the dislocated village we just set up. It hasn't been worked before, I'm told, but you'll have ample time to make an air-reconnaissance. Some of it is just too thick to even consider using vehicles. Maybe we'll logger your tracks close to the work area. We'll discuss it in detail if and when you go. I'd like to use two companies in there . . . yours and T. J.'s."
He hasn't had the opportunity to work the woods yet and this will give him the chance."

"Is he coming back to us from Terra?"

"Only for purposes of S & D. He'll stay with them for outposting. I've got to get to Taurus Charlie. See you tomorrow."

Bandit 6 watched the LOH take off and wondered why in hell didn't he ask for a short pass to Vung Tau. Hell, he thought, my executive officer is competent and if this S & D thing doesn't work out, all he'll have to do is run this goddam road. He made a mental note to question LTC Hackett as soon as he found out about their missions. He hoped they wouldn't go into the jungle. He began working out plans to go to Vung Tau and see the South China Sea.

Vung Tau was the Rest and Recreation Center for several Divisional units in South Viet Nam. Laying on the coast of the South China Sea, the ocean was the large attraction to in-land troops, but the usual whore-infested quick-deal-wars common to any military area brought one or two of these troops out of the woods. The town's beaches were divided between the Vietnamese and the allied military personnel. The split, strictly enforced, was brought about by some racial strife involving U. S. black soldiers. That was the dirty rumor, anyway - unsubstantiated. Vung Tau did
sport one uncommon sight: ponies pulled tiny fiacres around the town in competition with pedicabs and Lambrettas. The rest of the town consisted of a drink and a soft-sheeted bed.

Bandit 6 had finally asked his boss for five days of free time. He flew in fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters for several hours, most of the time consumed by frequent stops. He readied for a spree and some peaceful living. These could be had in this French-oriented town. "Charley" avoided the area largely because the R & R center provided funds indirectly for his military operations. Bandit 6 encountered an acquaintance from a previous assignment, and through him, several U. S. civilians who "worked" for the Agency for International Development. For awhile Mike enjoyed himself. The drinking, carousing, and other things were enjoyable, but he found that he could not really relax. There was still a job to do and he thought he should be there back with his company. He wasn't helped by the civilians who wanted to know about the "war" and war trophies, as most of them had never heard a shot fired.

As suddenly as he got there, Bandit 6 departed and returned to his unit. He was both remorseful and determined, but he was also very scared.

Tubes were hanging from the ceiling into my arms. What was the thing in my nose? Why can't I breathe? Focus, focus! Sleep. No, wake up! What's wrong? TV set blaring?
Bullshit! Something is wrong. What the hell is wrong?

"Glad you're back, Mike. Your XO was doing fine, but we've got a new mission for you. You're attached to Titan effective 0600 tomorrow. Their mission is to S & D eight kilometers north of Lai Khe, just above the rubber plantation we worked over with Rome plows last month. No U. S. forces have been in that area to our knowledge. The Headquarters, 7th NVA Division is reportedly massing there for the Winter-Spring Offensive they keep talking about. You'll move in with a tank platoon attached and establish a landing zone. It's bound to be hot. Titan's entire unit will be coming in. The operation will be named later when they think of something cute, and you won't be briefed by Titan 6 until he gets his battalion in. Start collecting what material you'll need for fortifications now and I'll give you more info later tonight."

"They reorganized pretty fast after losing two companies last month, didn't they?" Mike asked, wondering how good the unit was.

"Yes, and the CO's green, too. If you run into any problems working with him, give me a call and we'll work something out. Charlie Company is up for some duties like this and they can spell you if necessary. This operation is only supposed to last a few days, but if much resistance is met, it will be extended."

"Bandit 6, we're fine. We just found a large cache of food - rice and canned foodstuff, but Titan 6 is taking credit for the discovery on next high's push. I dusted off one tanker. The lead tank took a B-40. The main gun is out, but both machineguns are operative. I've had to reinforce the tankers with Infantry. I'm not clearing the north side of the "find" for Titan 6 while he gets the goodies out."
"Taurus 6, roger, I monitored his report to next high. The credit's yours. They knew he wouldn't have lost a tank crewman otherwise. I plan on pulling you out tomorrow and letting C Company replace you. Can you wait that long, over?"

"Bandit 6, affirm. But we've been having our problems. We picked up quite a few Purple Hearts last night, over."

"Taurus 6, roger, I monitored, out."

Captain, you suffered a gunshot wound through and through. Your spinal column has been fused. The nerve roots leading from your spinal cord have been severed and there is no way of telling which ones have been affected yet. Later we might be able to tell. The chances are not good for you to walk again, but that remains to be seen. That thing protruding from your stomach is called a col . . . .

Holy fuck! Goddam! Teeth-gritting son-of-a-bitch. It's not true, is it? No! It's not true. I'll be out of here in a couple of days. If I could move my legs, I'd get up and show those bastards. What will Norma say? The kids? The kids, the kids . . . .
TELEGRAM 12 February 1968

Dear Mrs. Ciganovic: We regret to inform you that your husband, CPT Michael J. Ciganovic, was critically wounded on 9 February 1968, in the Republic of South Viet Nam. He is hospitalized in Long Binh and will be evacuated to the United States as soon as possible. We will try to . . . . . . . . .
Schmidt spoke to his partner, his popeyes protruding unusually larger. Last night's booty was good. Toad shook his head while listening to Schmidt's account of the previous night's "take".

Schmidt and Toad were alone in the hootch they shared as sleeping quarters with ten other people, give or take a couple. They were never sure how many there would be at one time. Transfers, for one reason or another, were not uncommon in the special detachment of the "body handlers" - part of the 837th Medical Battalion. More often than not, the men and boys soon wearied of their loathsome chores. Sacking bodies made most of them eager to move to other jobs, even if it meant eventual transfer to a grunt-medics slot.

"Jesus, Schmldty, we've got to stop doing it," Toad said. "Sooner or later someone's going to get out of joint when they find out what we're doing. We've got to stop."

The tails of Schmidt's eyes smiled. Schmidt savored the way things had gone for him during the night. He studied Toad in fragments, with jerky eye movements, then he whispered hoarsely in his normal tone.

"Toad, look at it this way. Most of those guys die. Once in awhile one of 'em pulls through but we ain't done a guy yet who looks like he's gonna make it, have we?"
Schmidt seemed calm and rational but Toad watched his eyes. They were alarming. You couldn't look into them and see a person. You saw nothing at all. They seemed to ... belong ... apart.

Toad knew Schmidt enjoyed stealing from bodies. Particularly from dead officers. You could always count on a score if an officer was brought in, Schmidt had taught Toad. Toad realized they hadn't taken many chances but his conscience bothered him. Not only about stealing, but from handling all those wasted and wounded guys, guys who had families somewhere, brothers, sisters, lovers ... .

They had even handled one American woman, a round-eye who had been killed in a rocket attack when a 122mm destroyed the Red Cross girl's stucco abode. Toad couldn't bring himself to handle her, but Schmidt had shoved her into the bag, chuckling. Toad wouldn't swear to it, but Schmidt had appeared to wrap his hands over her chest as he lifted her. But Toad had alibied to himself for Schmidt: bodies had to be grabbed like that to lift them, men or women.

Toad had turned away, not wanting to watch the once-pretty girl being stuffed into a plastic bag.

"Toad, look, stop worrying, will ya?" Schmidt whined. "I guarantee we'll never be caught. Why do you think the teams are shifted? The honchos think they prevent stuff like this by having us work with different guys all the time rather than with the same partner always. They're happy with their solution. They think people are better
than they really are. As long as there ain't no beefs we
got nothin' to lose." Schmidt hit his leg hard. "Look,
I'll tell you what! We'll just work on guys that are dead.
We won't bother with the guys that are being sent to hospi-
tals. Will that satisfy ya?"

Toad was bothered. He wondered if he should tell
Schmidt that he had put in a 10|9 to work as an Infantry
medic. That was his military occupational specialty in the
first place, but Toad had learned that the Army had a way of
putting you where it wanted you, regardless of what you had
been trained for.

He decided not to tell Schmidt about his request.
Even the section leader had told him to forget it, but Toad
had hopes of being transferred because the request had to be
forwarded to the commanding officer. At least he had been
told so, and his desire to get out of the predicament - of
sacking, and of robbing, bodies - made him optimistic.

"Schmidty, I know we've got this thing wired and I
don't think we'll get caught. That worries me less than
just handling those stiffs," Toad half-lied. He knew they'd
get caught sooner or later and he wanted out before that
happened.

"The average stay in this job has been about a month,"
Toad continued. "I've been here twice that long. You've
been here more than six months, which is too goddam long.
You'll start going crazy soon. I don't like this shit like
you seem to, and I don't want to lose my marbles."
Schmidt did not take offense. To Toad, he seemed to like the work. Schmidt became mesmerized looking at bodies. Often he paid less attention to money they found than to a particular wound, wondering aloud how the individual was killed. "Look at this fucker's jaw!" he once remarked, eyes bulging. Toad remembered swallowing his own coffee vomit. The dead man's jaw was half gone; blood, bone fragments, and dirt coagulated in a mess. The glimmer in Schmidt's eyes had been unnatural.

"Look, how much money you made in the last few weeks, Toad?" Schmidt asked. "I'll tell you how much. Eight hundred and forty-seven bucks, that's how much. And it's been because when you first came here I sized you up and took you under my wing and promised to make you some money, didn't I? Well, you're making it, kid. You're making three times as much as the Army pays you, that's what. Don't let it get you down, man."

True enough, Toad silently confessed. They split the take down the middle, precisely, to ensure that neither of them got religion and spilled the information. That much money and how many bodies? He couldn't remember. Two months ago when he started it had been slow. Compared to now. The first half of February, 1968, had been very good. There were no problems in getting Military Pay Certificates changed into Treasury Bonds or Money Orders. Everybody had some sort of money-changing gimmick and the cashiers gave little notice to other peons who wanted to make a fast buck, blackmarket or otherwise.
"Schmidty, you're a stupid bastard sometimes," Toad said with some trepidation. He was afraid of Schmidt, because of his size, but also because he thought Schmidt was . . . weird. His eyes made him look eerie, particularly working at night with flashlights. Dead. That's what they were, those eyes. Dead! They gave Schmidt an insanely determined look. Toad respected Schmidt's kind of barbarity out of fear.

"Well, anyways," Schmidt said, "it's too bad you had CQ last night, kid. I worked from around midnight 'till three a.m. with that jerk, Sanchez. Sanchez tells me he has to take a crap and just after he leaves, two dustoffs come in with five bodies and three wounded guys. Naturally the wounded guys are taken to the rubber-bubble operating rooms right away, and I was told to get the five bodies the hell out of there. Everyone was busier than maggots. Stretchers and all that, right? Well, after the choppers take off, I'm standin' there all alone with five dead guys."

"You don't stand with dead guys," Toad pointed out helpfully, a sycophant who despised, but rationalized, his own complicity.

"Ah, Christ, will you let me tell you? Anyways, I have two smokes waitin' for that goddam do-gooder Mexican to beat his meat in the crapper.

"Then I notice with my light that one of the dead guys is an officer, a second-lt. Matter of fact, he was an Artilleryman, probably a Forward Observer since he was with
a bunch of grunts. Anyways, I drop the light to his pocket and the prick's got a bulge in it, right? Naturally I take a look and it's not a wallet, man, but a goddam SOI. Know what an SOI is? It's a confidential book with all the radio frequencies and call signs for a bunch of the division units, maybe all of 'em, I don't know.

"Well that scares the shit out of me right away 'cuz I'm not gonna get my ass jammed in a security violation, so I put the thing back in his pocket. Then I notice that his other pocket has a bulge, too. And surer than hell, it's a fat wallet.

"Anyways, I don't get a chance to look in it because Pancho Villa starts coming back, so I stuff the wallet in my pocket and start to look at the SOI again when Sanchez gets there. Know what he says? He says, 'Specialeest Schmeedt, you seen s'pose to do dis.'" Schmidt squealed like a stuck sow, bobbing up and down between his knees.

"I almost shit my pants laughin'," Schmidt said, pleased with his imitation. "I said, 'Pancho, you and me are gonna get a commendation for tonight's work.' And he tells me I'm fulla shit but I tell him about the SOI. Anyways, to cut the story short, I tell him it's our duty to get the SOI back into channels ASAP or we might screw up the war effort. He bought it all."

More squeals emerged from the twisted face. Schmidt beamed watching Toad for approval, but Toad jingled his dog tags and avoided looking at Schmidt's bulbous eyes.
"We loaded the bodies and I managed to pull the bills out of the wallet without Sanchez seeing me," Schmidt continued. "When we emptied their pockets inside the building, Sanchez sees the guy's wallet. It was one of those large ones, like a checkbook case, and he opens it. Then I jump on mister-good-guy-Mexican for looking through the guy's wallet, and he gets scared I'm gonna rat on him. He tells me he just wanted to see if the guy had a picture of his family, which he did have, and Sanchez asks me not to say anything to anyone about him looking through the wallet. I told him I wouldn't since he just felt sorry for the stiff's family, but I told him not to do it again." Schmidt again fell into a squealing fit of laughter.

"Anyways, we turn the stuff over to the graves and registration guy, and he thanked his ass off for giving him the confidential papers so quick. He said he'd tell the First Shirt and maybe we could get some time off for being so goddam good at our job. Ain't that a laugh?"

Schmidt snickered frantically at the punchline to his moribund account.

"How much did you get?" Toad asked, not entirely disconcerted.

"Oh, I forgot to tell ya. This butter-bar is worth five hunert bucks, man. Musta been playing cards to have so much loot with him. And I'll tell you what. I'm giving you a hundert of it 'cuz we're partners, even though you didn't help, okay?" Schmidt said.
"I don't want it, Schmidty," Toad said too quickly. "I didn't help you or any of that. You keep it."

"It's okay, kid, it's okay. You and me are partners and I figure if you score big some night when I'm not with you, you'll cut me in too. Ain't that right?"

Toad took the money. He needed it, he told himself, and his thoughts drifted to images of his girlfriend, and of his father. He sent his money to his girl because his father would know he was sending too much. Toad looked to the future. Nine more months on the tour and he'd be finished with it all. He'd be where he wanted to be - if he could stand it long enough.

Toad was jerked back into the real world.

"Anyways, Toad, we got to get more," Schmidt whispered in his throaty way. "I'm not going to tell you now much I've made since I been here, but it ain't enough. You've got to make more for all those goddam plans you keep telling me about, and I promise, we'll leave the wounded guys alone. You're right! They could be trouble later on so we'll only do the dead guys, okay?"

"Yeah, sure, Schmidty, I guess so. Only let's take it easy. If we're going to stay in this shithole, let's at least stay out of Long Binh Jail."
SPRING

The eyes of Spring are dead,
and cast sallow glances.
Brown and diseased grasses
sprout delayed buds
long after I cease to care.

Meadowlarks sing and false notes
pierce the frigid air
while tiny snowflakes threaten
escape from heavy clouds.
Dead Spring, false Spring, lead-heavy Spring.

Weight-laden spirits
deadened by lingering Winter sickness.
Happy souls wounded by disease,
kin to the brown grasses.
Heliolaters waiting to worship their God.
Garcia placed the pillow securely against the bottom of my feet, bracing it against the old white steel rails. My drooping feet felt good propped that way and I told Garcia.

"My feet feel real good like that. Thanks a million."

"Forget it, sir. It's just part of the job."

"I know, but it still feels good." I could see that Specialist 5th Class Garcia, a thin man with glasses, was embarrassed. I thought maybe no one had thanked him for his help before.

He dropped part of the catheter wrappings he had moved to pick up from my night stand. When he stooped to retrieve it I saw his hair up close. It was black and shiny and my night light hit it just so, lining it with gray. He stood up. The things in his hands were still dripping, the last ten inches of the thin tube stained yellow like a membrane from my gut.

"Anything else for the night, sir?"

"No. I feel better already."

"Have a glass of juice. You need more fluids." He left abruptly through the white curtains surrounding my bed and he left the light on. I felt better. I had needed my catheter changed and I felt a little like Garcia had rescued
me. It was late and I had felt a fever coming on. I could count on it every seven days. Patients sometimes know when they need to have something done for them and in my case, I hadn't hesitated to ask, even at three a.m. There are signs to indicate when one's bladder is badly infected, even lacking pain in a centralized area, and I knew them. But I think Garcia felt that the job could have waited for the morning shift to come on duty. Graveyard usually didn't have to handle projects like this.

The curtains parted and Garcia stepped through. He placed a quart-sized stainless steel pitcher on the night stand.

"There you go. Need anything else?"

"Pour me a glass. I'll have some now."

He poured the glass full, then handed it to me as I tried to raise up on my elbow.

"Thanks again, Garcia. I appreciate what you've done. Most orderlies don't like to take time to help. I want you to know I appreciate it."

Garcia avoided my eyes. He didn't want to acknowledge me. He knew he was trapped. He didn't want the thanks, to show the acceptance that would bind him to me if he took my offerings personally. He might have to consider giving me special attention on his shift, to care for my needs out of the ordinary. He nodded noncommittally.

"Do you need anything else, sir? Before I finish my rounds?"
"No. Leave the light on. I'll get it when I finish my juice."

Garcia said good night and left again. I swallowed a large drink of the juice and gagged. It was pineapple and it reminded me of my last trans-Pacific flight strapped to the third-tier litter of a C-141. I had been sick then and a nurse brought me some juice to calm my stomach. She was a major, dressed in a blue flight jacket with a fur collar. She handed me the juice, and while I drank it greedily, she helped hold the container to my lips. When I finished, I thanked her. She said no sweat and turned to leave when it came. I rolled over as far as my chest straps would allow and puked over the edge. Two guys below, strapped-in similarly, began yelling and swearing. The major returned and patted me on the head motherly and said it was all right let it all come out.

I felt my body start to react to the juice I had just swallowed. I didn't hesitate this time either. I threw up on my chest, covering my blue pajamas with juice and bits of lobster. Puking tightened by stomach muscles, forcing more urine from my body through the new catheter. I could hear it gush into the bottom of the clean gallon jug below my bed. I heard Garcia moving back down the quiet hallway toward my ward. I recognized his voice, soft as it was in the quiet hospital wing.

"Son-of-a-bitch!!"
HECATOMBUS

From my fresh grave I can touch your robe
although hundreds have gone this way
and have not touched the silk hem.
No, I have seen what little there is
upon this mad earth.
And you deserve each other.

At birth - first moment we are free
to expect return.
Were the death longer and the birth shorter!
Would we have more time?
Would it please us more?
Would mothers keep us longer?

None of that is important, Hecatombus.
Throw your hoe of soil on my eager face.
End my complexity, my mundane existance.
I have found what it is . . . shall I tell you?
No!

You will never know and I shall keep my secret forever,
even after you have reached for that silk hem.
THE SOUND OF UNCLE HARVEY'S FLOWERS

Entering the shop, I heard the bells chime in warning of my arrival. I had heard them before somewhere, and my mind reeled off the possibilities, using its own coded FORTRAN. I turned toward the origination of the sound and saw a memory. That is to say, before I realized I saw the bells, I was instantly transported by some magic of the tinkling back to Southeast Asia. Strange, because in my time there, I cannot recall ever having heard a bell, particularly one like I found myself enchanted with at the moment. I do not know if I saw the bell first, or if I saw myself hurling around the world at a fantastic rate, as if I was spinning a child's World Globe in amusement. I did not find myself, upon introspection, traveling to any particular place, any special unconsciously etched acre of ground branded by trauma. Rather, I saw only Southeast Asia. I was, in a way, the overlord of an ancient place surveying a map of what seemed to be partly mine. I just as soon found myself contemplating the chimes again. They were of the Oriental variety. That is to say, they were American dime-store chimes, copies of Asian tinkling ones, often found on the porches of old ladies. They were little square chunks of glass which, when held together by almost invisible strings, are made to chime when brushed against one another by outside
forces, being, usually, wind or doors or some other variety. My chimes, those I faced, were small square chunks of orange yellow striped black pieces of glass, remindful of tiger skin. I do not, as I indicated, know if the sound of those shrill tinkles, or the colors themselves perhaps, are what transported me, momentarily as it were, into another part of the world. I can only report that when I know I saw them, they altogether meant nothing to me. But, when I do not know I saw them, I was not within myself, if even for seconds.

My musings, however, were brief, as I indicated, and I entered the shop to make my purchase, closing the door behind me, of course setting off another tinkling reaction. I approached the counter which was attended by a small wiry person, and upon my announcement of a need for funeral flowers, I was escorted to view the special of the day. It was only after I left the shop upon making my acquisition, setting off the tinkling again with my departure, that I realized I had bought Uncle Harvey a bouquet of Tiger Lilies.
PART II

CHAPTER FROM A NOVEL
The lay of the land was unsuitable for a Night Defensive Perimeter. A creek hollow, for Christ's sake, what the hell were they thinking of? Just north was a perfectly suitable piece of high ground. The creek bed ran to the west flowing into the Saigon River somewhere. The hollow was clear of growth, looking more like a creek bed pasture at home than a potential fighting ground. A small pond about one quarter acre in size had been created naturally by deadfall. The ground sloped upward to the north and south, with sparse growth at the tops of each slope. Dense woods grew to the west three hundred meters from the road which crossed a small bridge over the creek. On the east, across Highway 13, running at an angle not quite parallel to the road, were the remnants of a railroad track. Some of the track was missing but the beams remained. The slope rose gently upward on that side, too. A small valley. Not at all suitable.

Company B - Taurus Bravo - had arrived a few minutes earlier, the company commander having surveyed the ground while riding in on his Armored Personnel Carrier. Terra had established a hasty perimeter the previous night. When Bandit 6 looked around, no foxholes of any kind had been dug. Hasty indeed. What would they have used for protection
last night if they'd been hit, he wondered. It was time to
find the company commander in charge of the rat pack the
Bandits were replacing. He jumped off his tracked vehicle
and headed for a small canvas hootch, guessing it was the
Command Post. He was mildly surprised when he saw the
other captain who was talking into a handset.

When the other man finished his transmission, he
turned to the intruder, smiling, and the two shook hands.
They had known each other in their basic training and had
eventually been stationed about fifteen miles apart in Ger­
many, though they had not become more than acquaintances.

The two men spent a few minutes reminiscing but the
taller man whom Mike was replacing looked nervous. He
wanted to get out of there and said so.

"What's the problem here, Bill?" Mike asked.

"No problems, the area is just spooky, that's all.
Our listening posts picked up lots of movement last night
and we had no cover, nothing. We got in here late yesterday
and were told to pick a good spot for an NDP. We knew we'd
be replaced today but not by whom."

"When are you leaving and how are you being picked up?"
Mike asked.

"As soon as that asshole boss of mine gets me some
ships. You'll have to provide security when we leave."

Walking outside the hootch, Mike looked around again
and was disgusted with the choice the other man had made.
"Why here? Why not up on top over there, or there?" he
asked, pointing to both sides of the valley.

"Because it seemed right at the time. Look, we were being hurried. You know how those quick fucking unexplained moves go. And besides, my boss flew in and liked the area, too. So we stayed."

"Why no holes?"

The tall captain looked sour but Mike didn't care. He wasn't happy about the place or the method of shifting units around without adequate information either.

"Holes?" the tall captain exclaimed. "We scraped some trenches because we were moving today. We had no equipment given to us, no bags, no wire, nothing. I just figured let's sit quiet for the night and maybe nothing will happen, that's all. Like I said, we want to get the hell out."

Mike wanted to ask if they had entrenching tools, but he just nodded and looked away, pretending to check the terrain again. It was still there. Man, oh, man, what a mess. He didn't know who he was going to be attached to but he hoped it wasn't Terra. The question was answered a few minutes later. The brigade commander landed unannounced.

Both men met Colonel Boland, a man not highly esteemed by his subordinates.

"What's going on here?" the colonel demanded turgidly. The two captains eyed each other and Mike decided to speak first.

"I just arrived, sir, with Taurus Bravo. Captain Landers is waiting for slicks to take his company out of here."
"Waiting?" the colonel shrieked. "I lined those ships up over a half hour ago. Just a goddam minute!" The colonel stomped away, spoke to the major who had accompanied him, then stomped back to the junior officers. "Major Taganetti is finding out what the hell the hold up is. What are you setting up here? Rather, how are you setting up here?" he demanded.

"Sir, I'd like to set up on that hill over there on the other side of the creek. I don't like being down here in this bottom," Mike answered. "We've got a basic load of wire and bags with us and we can get on it right away, only we've got to secure the ships when they load his company," he added, jerking a thumb at his acquaintance.

"Why move there now?" the colonel asked. "Stay here, this is only temporary. We're going to clear that space with plows tomorrow. Stay here tonight. Tomorrow you'll secure the plows while they clear that area. You'll be operating with Tallon, has anybody told you that?"

"No, sir," Mike answered, relieved that he wouldn't be attached to Terra. Tallon had a good reputation and they had just had some tough going up north at Bu Dop. He was relieved that he'd only have to stay in the small valley one night, but he was also a little angry that this bumbling colonel wouldn't let him move to higher ground.

Hands on hip, Colonel Boland turned in a circle looking at the terrain. "Right! Well, when the ships come in, get busy on this place for tonight." Boland strode off toward
his waiting Huey, failing to return salutes, and forgetting that he had told them nothing about the arrival of the ships they were waiting for.

Both captains let the lack of information pass and watched the aircraft float skyward. They looked at each other and grinned. Nothing had to be said about Colonel Boland. He said it all himself . . . posing, stomping, shrieking.

The slicks arrived soon after Boland's departure, and aside from an ass-chewing Bill Landers got from his boss - Terra 6 - for leaving a dirty area ("Sterilize the son of a bitch, Captain.")}, no other difficulties arose over the "straight-legs'" departure. Things would become strained after Taurus Bravo began establishing its perimeter.

The pond presented a problem for digging holes on the lower ground, requiring the entire company to shift. Some of the NDP was east of the road, which was fine with Mike because they could control the small bridge and the road, but part of the perimeter, because of the creek bed, was on the downslope of the valley, facing uphill. It was a bitch for fields of fire from a foxhole because of the slope of the hill. In a hole at that point, you could only hope for good grazing fire. Mike wished he had argued more with the brigade commander, even if they were to remain there for one night.
The brigade commander himself was the major problem. He flew back to Mike's NDP late in the afternoon and wanted to see how the work was coming. He walked the perimeter with Bandit 6, followed by the inscrutable Major Taganetti. Boland wanted to change locations of several of the holes, only one of which Mike was able to talk him out of changing because of the water table. The others had to be changed, and changed they were. Mike decided to let the son of a bitch play his school-theory game and kept his mouth shut during the rest of the inspection. Once he caught Taganetti's eye and saw a smile cross the major's face before he turned away. The smile meant Mike had an ally. Fortunately, Boland left the company to its tasks, having made his impression, and Mike saw to it that his wishes were carried out. Except on one hole. It was impossible to utilize that hole, a rearward one, to support the front holes. It sat too far behind and was in a depression. Mike moved it forward, where it had originally been, even though it was a little too far forward. There, at least, its occupants could fire adequately.

Unfortunately, Boland made a third trip to see if the holes had been dug to his specifications. It was a Division phobia, the Mayhem Hole, so named after the Commanding General who designed it. The CG was proud of his holes. No doubt about it, they were good holes. They were self-supporting, laid out on paper or extremely flat ground, with alternate holes being placed behind the ring of front holes.
Each hole had two apertures at forty-five degree angles, the
direction of which covered the front of the forward holes,
providing there were clear fields of fire. Looked at from
the air, it appeared as if two circles of bunkers were laid
out, the rear holes filling the gaps of forward holes. The
holes themselves were overheaded with Engineer stakes and
sandbags, at least two bags thick. The front and sides were
also sandbagged. The apertures had to be correct. They
were expected to be laid out from the outside inward, 24
inches, 18 inches in the center, and 6 inches on the inter­
ior. The entry hole was to the rear, of course, and the
hole had to be prepared to accommodate from two to three men
standing up. Grenade pits were dug inside to prevent being
blown up entirely from a well-aimed throw. The Mayhem Hole,
in short, was a pain in the ass, but a necessary evil.

Mike thought the CG spent more time taking names con­
cerning preparation of the foxhole than on anything else.
On Boland's last trip, he found the hole Mike had moved back
to its original spot. Mike got his tough-shit-card punched
but he won the point - mainly because Boland was called on
the radio by someone with enough authority to make him run
to the waiting chopper. Within moments he was gone. Mike
mused on the idea of moving holes in the ground. How did one
really do that?

B Company worked through the night to make the holes
safe for themselves. And the night was calm. The listening
posts heard no strange or extraordinary noises or movements
outside the perimeter, only the noise of digging and a few people swearing.

By 0830 the company had sterilized its makeshift NDP, filling up holes which had been dug only hours before, coiling concertina wire, extracting stakes, filling sumps - a hardship in frequent changes of location.

At 0900 the hopeful Mike Ciganovic was briefed by the Operations Officer, Tallon 3, though the encounter initially gave Mike cause for concern. The S-3 was wearing sunglasses, and prior to his landing in the NDP, he had sounded pushy. Mike didn't like pushy people and shades seemed out of place. But his concern evaporated when they met. The major was competent and gave Mike a thorough briefing.

That day would be spent preparing Thor 8, as it was to be named after the Cav's nickname for the highway, and it would be placed on the hill Mike wanted to use the day before. Rome plows were being brought in convoy from Chan Tanh by another unit. Taurus Bravo would have to clear a portion of road stretching both north and south of Thor 8. The entire battalion to which B Company was attached would be involved in clearing areas to be known as Thor 7, 8, and 9. When the plows arrived, they'd clear the hill tops, scrape them clean, and the mechanized company would provide security. Some of B Company would be used to begin the NDP
preparation and others would ride "shotgun" for the plows. When the area was cleared, the plows would dig holes for the ACAV's, a Division nickname for the armored personnel carriers stemming from the Armored Cavalry. Mike's company would direct the digging operation. The ACAV's would be sandbagged. Everything was to be dug in - tracks, trucks, jeeps, water trailers, tents, . . . and people. Thor 8, like the others, would be permanent NDP's.

The battalion commander of Tallon, Lieutenant Colonel Damiano, would headquarter at Thor 7 with C Company. A Company would have control of Thor 9 with one mechanized rifle platoon detached from Taurus Bravo. Thor 8 would be comprised of Tallon's B Company and the remainder of Taurus Bravo. The two B Company commanders were to work together on the project. Another seven similar night defensive positions would be constructed from Lai Khe north to An Loc, all of which would be numbered sequentially from 1-10, including Thor 7, 8, and 9.

After verifying time frames and security for Tallon Bravo's insertion, Tallon 3 departed in the small rotar craft.

Mike decided to use his weapons platoon in the road clearing operation, the gun crews becoming dismounted security to the south, the shortest distance, along with the first platoon and whatever portions of his headquarters people and vehicles could be spared. The second and third platoons would clear to the north. Dipsey Magalee's third platoon
would remain at Thor 9 when Tallon Alpha inserted there, and would be attached to the other company. Mike's policy, like his battalion commander's, was to detach his most competent personnel. Mike would be left with a company (minus), a fact which wouldn't matter later anyway, but it left him short-handed. He hadn't been assigned a "leg" platoon in exchange for his mech platoon, which was how things were supposed to be worked.

Mike wanted to make the trip south so he could meet the battalion commander, a tough little Italian whose reputation as a fighter had spread through the Division, the truth of which would be verified in the next week of operations. But there was no time to meet him now. There never seemed to be enough time.

The clearing operation went without a hitch. No mines or mine indicators were found, and both ends of the area were open within an hour. Tallon 6 inserted his headquarters and his Alpha Company "hot", which impressed Mike even though his company was on hand to accommodate them for security purposes if necessary. Mike was impressed because most other "leg" outfits would have insisted on his participation knowing the mechanized unit was in the vicinity. Not Tallon 6. Damiano's mind was on other things, like establishing the NDP's as quickly as possible which meant getting the plows up as soon as they could. The road had to be out-posted and cleared. Adding to Mike's impression, Damiano allowed Taurus Bravo to finish what it was doing before
giving the company other duties. A nice touch, Mike thought. He did take time to meet Tallon 6 while waiting for the plows, and he came away inspired by the vivacity of the swarthy commander. Mike felt that things would work on schedule with this outfit, unlike most of the others who concerned themselves very little with the different needs of a mechanized company such as diesel fuel and .50 caliber ammunition. Mike was pleased that he had been assigned to Tallon.

The Plows arrived nearly an hour after the Bandits had opened their portion of the road and Mike used the opportunity to return to his clearing operation to look the ground over once again. He had not yet been able to do that adequately, only a few minutes that morning, and he wanted to see how much clearing had to be done. When he arrived he saw that there was more to do than he had figured. Resigned to the task, he headed back to meet the convoy. Maybe T. J.'s company was bringing the plows up. If so, Mike would like to see his close friend. He was mildly disappointed when he saw Taurus' Recon Platoon escorting the plows and trucks carrying supplies.

Once the division of labor became viable, everyone went to work. The hilltop clearing operation went slower than other jungle-busting operations they had conducted. The thick foliage, had to be cleared to the ground; nothing was to be left growing except several trees three to four feet in diameter. They would be left standing. It would
take too long for the blades of the plows to cut them, and disposing of them would be time consuming.

Mike met with his counterpart, Tallon Bravo 6, and Tallon 5, the latter of whom had been sent to Thor 8 to supervise the two companies. It was just as well. On sight Mike had begun to dislike the other company commander, a greasy thin man who was continually looking over his shoulder and who seemed arrogant . . . Mike recognized the signs in those who lacked respect for mechanized units, marking it up to jealousy. Fortunately, Tallon 6 had anticipated the reaction of two company commanders wondering who was to command the NDP, and he had sent Major Partkinson, his executive officer, to fill that role.

Their plans were worked out with no obvious difficulties, but Mike was made painfully aware of the problems involved in encircling another outfit. His ACAV's, including the maintenance, communications, and mortar vehicles, would be put on line, just behind the ring of Mayhem Holes. So Mike would have his entire company on the perimeter - even his medic's track. Tallon Bravo, on the other hand, would have only half the perimeter manned by his men, leaving the other half for Mike to fill with his mech-Infantry, minus one platoon, plus encircling the entire perimeter. It was the same old problem with straight-leg Infantry. He should have been used to it but he couldn't resist remarking to Major Partkinson about the situation. Partkinson replied simply, "Do the best you can." Of course. What the hell
else was there to do? When are legs going to understand the
difference between manning tracked vehicles and foxholes?

By mid-afternoon the plows finished clearing and Mike
put them to work digging holes for the tracks and other ve­
hicles. The other company had no further use for the Engin­
eers so Mike had them eat chow with his people, and gener­
ally took them under his wing. As a result, they needed no
supervision in digging the holes for his vehicles. Mike
thought you had to know when and how to take care of people.
The other company commander hadn't given any thought to
feeding the Engineers. Mike knew his feeling was that the
plows were tracked vehicles, too, and should be affiliated
with the mechanized unit. Mike needed them, on the other
hand, and he knew the way to having good holes dug in a
hurry was with a little kindness and good hot chow.

By nightfall, most of the holes were finished, both
foxholes and vehicle pits. Sandbagging would continue
through much of the night. The area would be improved for
the next week, and would in fact be modified throughout much
of the next year, depending on which outfits used the NDP.
But permanence means different things to different people.

Somehow, combined with digging the largest tent hole
in the NDP by hand, Chop Chop 6, Staff Sergeant Lee, a lanky
man with a perpetual grin, managed to put out a memorable
turkey dinner with all the fixings. The men took turns eat­
ing and relaxing with cigarets, but the work continued. The
Mess Steward had his cooks dig a sleeping area large enough
to have a hex-tent inside the hole. Mike commented on their lack of overhead cover, and they promptly dug a tunnel in the six-foot wall of the hole. It was hard to be critical of Chop Chop 6 after eating a delicious meal.

An unexpected addition arrived at Thor 8 after the troops had wiped their plates clean. A platoon of Cavalry-men in three tanks and four ACAV's of Infantry joined the two companies. The platoon couldn't get back to its mother unit before Division curfew and had been directed to Thor 8 to spend the night. The platoon leader, Sergeant First Class James Beam, a name which brought many chuckles encouraged by Beam himself, reported to Mike and said simply, "Hi, sir, I'd like to spend the night if you don't mind." He, too, seemed to grin easily.

Mike smiled back at the black noncommissioned officer and liked him immediately. He knew what the score was. He was brassy, called attention to himself, and was a hotshot. But he knew his trade. Mike found out in short order that the man was on his third tour in-country and he looked forward to more. "The pay's good," the NCO said, laughing as if it was a private joke.

Mike saw to it that Bean's men were fed turkey and coffee, and helped them establish defensive postures for the night. Sergeant Beam found a place for his tank just to the left front of Mike's buried ACAV and asked if he could settle there. The position was fine with Mike.
Major Partkinson met Beam and told him he wanted Beam on Tallon Bravo's frequency for the night. Tallon 5 said he'd have better control of the NDP. Mike protested, indicating that he had better radio capability and would be better able to converse with Beam than his contemporary, but the matter was settled - they thought.

Both companies exhausted their supplies of concertina wire and Engineer stakes in constructing the perimeter ring. Each of Mike's ACAV's carried a "basic load" of the items, and the trucks in convoy had brought a quantity with them for the straight-legs, but they still lacked enough to complete the job. They wouldn't be completely wired in for the night. Mike told his First Shirt to get on it, get an estimate, and to order more. "Get with the First Sergeant of the other company. They're the ones responsible for our supplies for now." Top Ayers understood the minor problem which brought a sigh of relief from Mike. Ayers hadn't shown too much initiative up to now, but his attitude was changing. He was working out well with "his boys" but Mike couldn't resist the thought that "It's about goddam time!"

Mike was still slightly troubled by the long day's events. Sharing the NDP with another company designated as "B Company" provided some problems with radio identification. It required using the unit's complete radio/telephone designator - Taurus Bravo or Tallon Bravo, and Mike preferred using the nickname Bandit, a time-consuming procedure even more so because radio procedure in the Division was slipshod.
Mike was somewhere in the middle. He preferred a shorthand system using the company's nickname or simply Bravo. But that was impossible with a new unit. The problem wasn't important enough to keep worrying about, so he forced it from his mind and hauled out his tape recorder from its styrofoam container to talk to his family.

Major Partkinson visited Mike soon after the recording equipment was set up. Mike stopped taping and invited the major to have a cup of iced tea. The pleasant surprise for the small amenity showed in the field officer's face, telling Mike he scored a point. The legs didn't get much of that sort of thing, whereas the mechanized troops could carry creature comforts on their vehicles.

"I can see that you're not going to get along with Captain Terrence White, are you?" Partkinson said to Mike, referring to the other company commander. The question, asked straight out with no preliminaries, surprised Mike. His face answered the question. The major continued, "The Old Man sent me to this NDP for that very reason. I wouldn't worry about it if I were you. White means well and he's become a little shakey after the crap we hit in Bu Dop. He almost got killed. Fortunately, a machinegunner cut the VC down while Terry was trying to clear his jammed weapon. He's okay, really," the major added sincerely.

"Well, sir, I don't have anything against him," Mike responded. "I just have a feeling that he doesn't want to cooperate." Mike depended on his feelings about other
people and he knew he was seldom wrong. He admitted it whenever he found he was wrong, but he thought the other captain was simply an asshole. "And how about the Cav people? Beam and his platoon? I'm sure White put you up to that, having Beam on the other frequency." Mike was getting out of bounds now, but he said it anyway, sure he was right.

"That's so," the tall crew-cutted officer admitted. "But I am the senior officer in this NDP, and I will have control of those people."

"Major, I don't mean to be shitty about it, but how are you going to do that? You don't have any radios for yourself, for example, and to get any you're going to have to take them from White. He simply doesn't have the capability with his equipment to put those people on his net. We're geared for it. What do you think will happen when seven other vehicles, or the people on them, are flooding the one prick-25 he uses for his company net? It's not gonna work."

Rubbing his nose and eye-ball ing Mike's three R/T 524's, the major said, "You're probably right. Why do you have three of those things in here? You authorized that many?"

"No, I only get two, one for battalion and one for company, but my forward observer has one, too. He's supposed to use his back-packed 25 but we scrounged one up for him. Makes a hell of a difference when we're moving mounted. But that's what I mean. We can handle all the traffic we
get simply by moving a switch."

Admiration showed in the major's eyes, but he stuck with the first plan. "Leave them on our frequency and we'll see how it goes. We're spending too much time worrying about that, anyway."

He was right. The real problem was one of personalities between the two commanders, each wanting to have more of the NDP under his control than the other. Each wanted to be in charge of the entire NDP. It was strictly a power play.

Changing the subject, Partkinson asked, "Say, do you always mark your artillery concentrations so close to the wire?"

"Sure. We like to have it in tight. I've got a great FO. He can lay them tighter than your dogtags if you want him to. Why?"

"Just wondered. I haven't seen DEFCONS brought in so close. Not a bad idea."

"We feel better knowing they're there if we need 'em."

The major finished his tea and left Mike to finish taping his news. "See you later," he called, walking off the ramp and up the small slope to the rear.

Teddy Foley, Mike's driver, walked inside the track after the major was gone. He asked Bandit 6 if he wanted to look at the sandbagging around the vehicle. Mike followed Teddy and was pleased with what he saw. He decided to forego the taping once he was outside the vehicle. He reentered
the ass end, put his recorder away, put on his steel pot and webbing, grabbed his CAR15, and began making rounds. He stepped back to the womb of his track a minute later and grabbed an AN/PRC 25, checked the dials, and threw it on his back. No sense in having an RTO carry this, he thought. Be back in a little while. He leaned slightly forward with the increased weight and walked into the sound of men digging.

The small man sitting in the tree did not take his eyes off the work parties until darkness fell. He had been in the tree, a mere four hundred and fifty meters from the center of the American perimeter, for several hours making detailed notes and drawings. Besides his pencil and notebook, he was equipped with a pistol, binoculars, and a map. Below him on the ground were three other men dressed alike, but each of them wore harnesses, canteens, and other paraphernalia. Each held an AK-47 Assault Rifle, banana clips protruding erectly. None of them smoked cigarettes or threw candy wrappers on the ground. All of them had malaria and were emaciated.

When darkness was complete, the man perched in the tree climbed silently down. The others came to their feet. Without a word they faded into dense woods. No one would find evidence that they had been there.
Mike Ciganovic moved to his first platoon which was commanded by Jim Walker. Jim was relatively new to the company. He had been transferred because of personality conflicts with the former company commander of Alpha, a man due for rotation within a few days. T. J. had already taken command of Alpha, but that was no consolation to Walker. Mike had been warned about Walker's disposition but he had had no problems with him. In fact, he had grown to like Walker's tight-lipped responses, even though they sounded as if they were coming out of an OCS candidate. Walker seemed determined not to get in trouble with Mike. He was RA-all-the-way and didn't want his newly begun career fucked up by two degrading officer efficiency reports. A few days earlier Walker had asked Mike if he would do his OER. Mike had been confused, saying of course he would, that was part of his job, but then remembered that Walker was talking about the one necessitated by his transfer from A Company. Mike decided to help Walker. He wasn't supposed to write the report on Walker but he thought the former Alpha 6 would rather not write the report anyway. Writing OER's wasn't a pleasant chore. But the arrangement on Walker's behalf didn't work. The S-1 caught the irregularity and sent Bandit 6's written work back to him. "Nice try," his memo said. Walker would end up with a bad report.

Jim's area was as ready as it could be considering the lack of equipment, and Mike met with Lieutenant MacMillan, the new "infusion/confusion" transfer, to walk through his
second platoon. Mac was on his third day with the company. He was the same lieutenant who had commanded the Recon Platoon of the 2/32 Infantry when the Bandits had been attached to them, and who had screwed up an ambush, much to the chagrin of that particular battalion commander. Mac was transferred on the Division-wide officer exchange which had brought as much confusion as infusion. Mike suspected that Mac had been high on the shit-list of his former commander and that had resulted in the transfer. It happened to others, too. You only had to piss someone off a little, only usually the transfer included a softer job, the old fuck-up-and-move-up routine. Not so this time.

As far as Mike could tell, MacMillan would work out okay. He had been working his buns off to please Mike and that was a good start.

Mike left the second platoon's boundaries and found himself walking through a platoon of Tallon Bravo's. He refused to check White's troops for him, agreeing with the ethics of it, even though he saw much that he didn't like, especially the squad-sized sleeping holes. Rather than confront the whole miserable lot of them, he cut to the rear of the holes and began checking his own weapons platoon which he had placed on line intermingled with Tallon Bravo for their quantity of .50's and small arms. He knew they'd get little opportunity to use their mortars, as usual, because they'd interfere with the larger artillery. Mike spent some time bull-shitting The Mexican, Sergeant Diaz, one of his
all-time favorite NCO's, then moved on to the maintenance crew and spent more time chewing the fat with Sergeant Ordway, the maintenance section leader. Both Diaz and Ordway had been at their jobs about ten years, and aside from being the best at their jobs, they were loyal to Bandit 6. He knew that from the way they talked to him. They were not afraid of him and they liked him.

Mike headed back to the womb-like sanctuary of his ACAV. He wanted to "war-game" the NDP one more time with Candy. The FO would drop more shit on intruders than the rest of the perimeter occupants combined.

Sergeant Cantrell and Captain Ciganovic both felt better after reviewing the artillery plan. In the event they were attached, they would both know how to shift the fires to allow the use of Air Force support or close-in gunship fire, depending on how they were hit. Or, as everyone joked, depending on the "situation", the catch-all answer to everything in the Army. Like most such plans, they would probably not be exercised. Not only were there few opportunities, but both Candy and Mike knew that when trouble did come, most of the artillery firing would be placed in the hands of a bird-dog pilot or one or more of the Division bird colonels or general officers. Nonetheless, they were prepared to run their own show, given the opportunity.
B Company had never had the opportunity to use all its plans. The company's positions had never been attacked by a force larger than itself while sitting in defensive positions.

When the review of the plans was finished, all the company leaders met at the CP. Mike briefed them for the next day's operation: road clearing (except for a few men to continue perimeter work) in conjunction with the other Infantry company, which would attach two platoons to work with Taurus Bravo to open the road again from Thor 7 to Thor 9. They would outpost until convoys resupplying the 2/36th arrived, unloaded, and returned to Lai Khe. To most of them, it seemed that the Division spent more time opening roads for resupply than anything else, unless it was digging more holes.

Mike wanted to spend more time getting to know Walker and MacMillan. Dipsey Magalee was the only old head, of the officers, in the company with him on this operation. Being the one he knew he could depend on, he had sent Dipsey to Thor 9, detached and out of his control. After talking with the two men, Mike spent more time with his Top Sergeant, going over some of the paperwork he had neglected in the last few days: changes to regulations, requests for R & R, awards and decorations, endless reminders of Division SOP, and other bureaucratic details. He completed the minor chores and settled back to put his thoughts in order, thinking he was alone. Someone shifted in the driver's
compartiment and Mike heard Teddy Foley's voice. It seemed to always have a question in it.

"How're things shaping up, sir? Things gonna get hot up here?"

"I don't know for sure, Foley. There's supposed to be a lot of bad guys moving around this neck of the woods. Maybe we'll find some of them. This is NVA country up here. This battalion we're with killed a lot of them a few days ago further north." He arched his brows when he said it, watching his Irish driver's curious face. Mike enjoyed bull-shitting the Chicagoan and realized that he was closer to Foley than he was with most of his people. Foley was capable of running the company himself. Connected to the same information on the radio as Mike, Spec 4 Foley knew almost as much about the company as the company commander.

"Hey, Foley, why didn't you go to OCS?"

The question clearly embarrassed the specialist fourth class. He had been asked before. "I just wanted to get my job done and get out of the Army as quick as I could, 6. I don't want to stay in."

"You would have only two more years after OCS. Three total, probably. Most of the OCS people get out anyway. You'd have been a good lieutenant. Is that why you always manage to be in the driver's seat during a briefing? Want to find out the good poop?"

Foley laughed with his CO. So he knew. "How'd you figure that out? I didn't think anyone knew."
"Christ, all I have to do is look. I think I'll have you run the company tomorrow. You game?"

"Hell, yeah. Can I give a little shit to those legs?"

"What's wrong with the legs? They a little hard to get along with?"

"Yeah! Santini and I talked with a few of 'em tonight, see if they had anything to trade, that kind of thing. They treated us shabby, know what I mean? We took a little abuse about riding around on these "iron monsters", as they put it, so we left 'em. It was like we weren't even in the same Army. I think the bastards are jealous."

"I get the same treatment from their officers, Foley, so don't let it bother you. I think they are jealous but that's their problem, not ours." He remembered the major's quizzical look at the radios and the glass of iced tea.

"Think we'll get hit tonight, sir?" Foley changed the subject. "It's pretty quiet out there."

"Who knows for sure? I just wish we had more wire with us. We're going to get more tomorrow. Anyway, we've got enough claymores out there to stop a bunch of guys and enough .50's to scare the hell out of anybody. I only hope we can use them all if we get hit." He was thinking of people moving in line of fire. Friendlies might get their asses blown off.

"I think it'd take an Army to get through to us anyway, 6. I listened to you and Candy." Foley thought the CO had "his shit together", but he couldn't say that to his face.
"I'm gonna try to rustle up a turkey sandwich, Teddy. Do you want anything?"

"Naw, thanks, Teddy. I'm just going to sit on my ass and think. Thanks anyway."

Good man. Not enough like him. Or maybe there were. Maybe you just had to spend time with them individually to find out how good they were. But that was impossible. They rotated every day, in and out of the company for one reason or another.

He crouched leaving the track's interior to find his cot, waving his hands in front of his legs at shin level. He found it and threw it open. He carried it inside and dropped it on the floor of the carrier. He pulled the poncho blanket and pillow he carried in a duffle bag along with an old Mauser, an old Gewehr 98 a warrant officer had given him on one of his few visits to the Lai Khe steam baths. The pillow was filthy. The gray and white streaks of its cover banded into a solid gray, most of which came from the swirling clouds of dust thrown from the ACAV's tracks. Dust was inescapable in the dry season, a fact of life with tracked vehicles.

He sat on the edge of the cot to take his once green and black canvass-topped boots off, noticing that the green now showed a reddish tint from the laterite dust. He undressed and slid between the fold of the single blanket, naked, the only way he could sleep comfortably. The coolness of the camouflage nylon quilt felt good to his body.
Underclothes were too warm. Few people wore them. The lack of shorts prevented chafing and fungus growth. He smiled, thinking back many years before when he had tried wearing boxer shorts and found them too loose for comfort. Now he wondered if he'd ever wear shorts again.

It was nearly 0100 hours - he lay without moving, listening to the idle chatter of the other company's listening posts, disturbed not at all when the red lights of the radio blinked in his face during a transmission. He was glad that he had no LP responsibility.

Barely ten minutes passed before one of the LP's gave a worried report to Tallon Bravo. Mike sat upright, his ears tuned to the pitch of the caller's voice. It told him as much as the words he was saying. Mike pulled his pants on, hoping the caller was only spooked, but realized he was not. The voice became more excited.

"They're all around us, let us come in, let us come in."

Their company commander's voice betrayed him, too. Tallon Bravo 6 was trying not to show emotion but he didn't quite carry it off. "Stay where you are," he said to the LP's. "Let's find out what we have out there before we panic."

Mike snarled out loud. "The son of a bitch is gonna kill those guys." Mike continued to dress while using the company net to warn his people of an impending attack. Jim Walker rogered, saying that they were picking up the sounds
of heavy movement, too, from their front holes.

The three radios in the ACAV were all in use now. On the battalion net he heard his contemporary tell the S-3 that one of his LP's detected some movement, not heavy, not "all around us", just movement. The S-3 rogered and told White to keep him informed. Simultaneously the other LP's were calling on Tallon Bravo's frequency - all of them getting lots of movement. He heard one of them give a "Wait, out", pause, then "They're all over the place. We're coming in, we're coming in."

What's that fucking White waiting for? Let them come in. They've done their job. Let 'em in now, you asshole!

The other company commander came on again with his betraying voice. "Stay where you are till we find out what we've got. Stay put."

Holy fuck!! They know what they've got now, you cocksucker!

Mike was fully dressed now, having just tied the boot laces around his ankles, not bothering with socks. He put on his steel and grabbed his webbing from the ramp lock, fed a magazine into his Car15, and sat on the cot and called his company at large, the "pork chop" upside down in his hand.

"The listening posts have not been called in yet. If you've got targets, take them with small arms only. No machineguns. Try to keep your fire from the LP's, they might have a chance to make it in."
The three platoons and headquarters elements rogered in turn, followed by a call from Jim Beam.

"I'm on your net now. I couldn't get Tallon Bravo 6 to answer me. Do you want me to open up? I can see all kinds of guys crawling around down there. I can get a good look from this high up."

"No, don't shoot yet! Let's keep your other vehicles on my frequency, too, if you can do it, but don't let them interfere, just listen in. Can you see any of the LP's?"

"Negative, but I think we're going to lose some of them."

"I'll get back to you."

Mike heard machinegun fire from the direction of the other company's front holes. Shit! What about the LP's? We've got to open up with bigger stuff.

Walker called. "We've got guys on our wire now, small arms isn't enough. Can we use our machineguns now?"

"Affirmative. Tallon Bravo's started so it's not our ass on those LP's. Let go with your claymores, too."

As if on cue, he could hear that the rest of the company overheard the transmission. The quick chop of M60's, .50's, claymore mines, and Beam's powerful 90mm tank guns all began firing.

Mike ran to Candy's hole ten yards to his left. Crouching, he ran the short distance in the light of flares Candy had begun requesting from the Artillery . . . Candy was busy talking with his contacts. Mike listened only long enough to get the gist of the young sergeant's remarks, was
satisfied, then ran to the side of Beam's tank. Mike watched the stream of tracers on all sides of the perimeter, and was attracted by the pop of a red flare in the vicinity of the road on the other side of the northern valley between the NDP and the village to the north. Immediately a B-40 rocket streamed from the same position. Mike felt an hypnotic effect by the stream of red and white sparkles trailing the rocket; it passed overhead, landing on the opposite side of the NDP in his weapons platoon vicinity. The rocket's sharp GRUMP made him flinch though it landed eighty meters away. His mind raced. He tried to get a feel for where the brunt of the attack was coming from, slowly turning in a circle. The heavy volume of fire indicated by the green tracer round of the North Vietnamese 7.62 ammunition told him that most of the activity was to his immediate front. Very little was in-coming on the southeast side of the perimeter. He sprinted to his ACAV.

Foley was in the driver's hatch, running the engine in order to raise the ramp. Mike threw his cot and the useless pillow and blanket out the rear. Santini raced into the interior and began climbing wordlessly into the Track Commander's hatch to man the big Browning. Santini was crazy about shooting the .50. Mike stopped him and saw the strained look on the handsome Italian's face. "Sorry, Santini, you won't be able to fire the gun. Too many people in the way. I want to use the hatch." Santini accepted the remark with a shrug.
"Can I go to the first platoon?" Santini asked. Mike decided he wouldn't need the company RTO and told Santini to get going. Santini was out of the track before Mike finished his sentence. He really likes this shit, Mike thought.

Grump-Grump-Grump!! Mortars were in-coming seemingly center mass of the perimeter. Tents, that's all I've got there. And trucks, a water trailer. What else? Chop Chop 6 will have his guys holed up. Let's hope they don't take one inside or they'll all be lost. Grump-Grump-Grump!! Nice groups of three.

Wooosh!! Bwack!! Sandbags hit. No dice, fellas. You're not getting through. Wooosh Bwack!! To the right, but close. Those fucking B-40 rockets won't penetrate.

"Taurus Bravo, Taurus Bravo 6," Mike called the entire company. "What have you all got?"

"This is 16; heavy small arms, some on the wire. Machineguns from the woodlines. Some rockets coming in, four so far, I think."

"26, same thing. I think we can see a mortar flash near the road to the north. So far nobody hurt. We're not getting anyth . . . . ."

Now what the fuck happened? Mike was in the TC hatch looking through the periscopes. The flares lighting the sky allowed him to see surprisingly well through the optical lenses.

"46, we're firing close in mortars. Want 'em shifted?"
"6, negative, keep them close but in front of 16."

"10, we're okay. I'm having a ball on this big ol' mother," Sergeant Perry, the Commo Chief drawled.

"Jim Beam, the one and only, we just lost one of our gunners. Took a B-40 in the chest. I don't know about the rest of my guys yet. Chalk up one friendly KIA. I'm mixing beehive and HE rounds. The fuckers are everywhere. It's a turkey shoot." Beam was ecstatic.

"6, roger, keep me posted; I don't have to worry about you."

He listened to the sounds around him. Several other rockets landed in the vicinity of his vehicle. The attraction of so many antennas, he knew without thinking about it. It was an old story. Mortars were falling, thumping with a steady pace in the interior of the NDP but so far were not affecting his people. He listened to Tallon Bravo's frequency. Their weapons platoon was taking a beating. They had gun pits almost center mass of the NDP and had taken two direct hits. The lieutenant and several others were killed, others wounded severely. No one had a count yet.

"46, one of our gunners just took one through the head, over!"

"Roger. Break. Taurus Bravo, any other injuries?"

"26 Alpha, affirm. 26 has a bad arm. We took a rocket on a forward hole. Both gunners and myself got hit. I'm okay."
"Bring 26 back here to my track. Bring the other guys, too. Can you man that hole?"

"26 Alpha, affirm. I'll stay here with the gunners. We're just cut up a little but 26 has a real bad arm. I'll get him back." Sergeant Wilson could handle things there.

No other casualties reported in his company.

"Beam, how about you?"

No response. "Beam, what's the matter?" Nothing.

Mike lifted his head through the top of the hatch and saw Beam helping two guys off his tank. One man stayed with him.

"Beam, what's up?" Mike yelled. The Cav sergeant couldn't hear him. Mike cocked an ear and looked around. No sweat. In-coming small arms and machinegun fire was dying down. He heard Tallon 6 trying to contact Major Partkinson but has having no luck. He took the call.

"This is Taurus Bravo 6. We've got in-coming mortars, B-40's, machinegun fire and small arms. Most of it is coming from the northwest and west. Some fires from the north near the village." As he spoke he continued to watch with his head out the hatch. He saw Beam's main gun fire accurately at what looked to be mortar flashes. "Very little activity on the south end. Moderate from the southwest. Nothing from the east but there may be mortars firing from there, I can't tell for sure. I estimate a battalion in strength. It's a very organized attack, over."
"Tallon 6, roger. Were the LP's able to get in? Break. Can you use gunships now? Break. We have air support scheduled in ten minutes. Be prepared to shift your artillery to the control of a birddog, over."

"Taurus Bravo 6, negative on LP's as far as I know. Gunships would have problems coming in now with the amount of fire we're pouring out. My 94 will give control to birddog when required, over."

"Rog, we'll make provisions for gunships. When you can, let them come in east to west and keep your fires at ground level. I'll put them on your net when we get 'em here. How about casualties?"

"I've got one KIA and eight WIA's. I'm not sure about your Bravo, but I know they have at least one officer KIA and several others wounded from their weapons platoon."

"Roger, keep me posted. Out."

The excitement was good, Mike felt. So far things were going well. Losses on the other side had to be large. At the moment, the few losses the company incurred seemed small enough for the amount of fire they were receiving.

Mike climbed from the hatch and told Taylor to climb up and look if he liked. Taylor didn't accept the offer. Mike told Foley he was going to take a look around.

He checked the dial on the PRC 25 again but decided against carrying the heavy radio. He ran to the communications vehicle, and was surprised to see the First Sergeant up to his ass in ammunition. He had been carrying box
after box from the eastern oriented vehicles for distribution on the other side.

"Good thinking, Top. We're gonna need a count of everything when this is over. I'm going for casualty counts now."

"Hey, 6, they just took the artillery out of my control," Candy yelled. "We've got a good birddog. I've worked with him before."

"Right. Just stick around and help where you can. Sergeant Ayers needs help now. Have your RTO give him a hand."

Mike scurried toward MacMillan's platoon to see how the lieutenant's arm was. Another rocket cruised overhead, exploding in the sandbags. Fucking antennas. Those people had us wired. He found Wilson limping from hole to hole. Wilson had a piece of shrapnel in his leg and a small cut on his arm.

"You okay?"

Right, sir. I just sent a man back with the lieutenant. His whole damn arm is blown open."

"If you sent him back I don't know how I missed him. How are the other two guys?"

"They can stay awhile."

"Any others hurt?"

"None."

"Could you see the LP's on this side?"
"No, nothing at all, sir. Poor bastards. Why weren't they brought in?"

"I don't know, Sergeant Wilson, but I think somebody had his head up his ass. I'm going to Walker's platoon."

He trotted, heading across the line of holes toward Beam's tank. In-coming small arms fire was negligible.

"Hey, Cap'n, can you get me another handset?" Beam yelled from the top of the tank. He was holding a broken handset in his hand like a trophy. "This one's no good anymore." Beam's shrill cackle cut the air like a tracer. "I took two rockets. Three of my crew got hurt. I told 'em all to leave, but this guy," he pointed to his assistant gunner, "wouldn't leave. He stuck around to help me. The other two guys are with your medics somewhere. I also had this handset shot out of my hand while I was trying to call you."

"How many other casualties you got?"

"Two dead. One with that rocket and another .50 gun­ner shot in the head. And these three guys, that's all."

"Okay, be right back."

Mike sprinted to his track, grabbed a handset off a radio, asked Ward if he'd had any calls, then noticed Mac­Millan sitting in a corner, trying to control himself. Mac's arm was bandaged. Mike could see signs of shock, and Mac was crying softly.

"I'll see you later, Mac. Good job."

He stopped at Candy's hole for an update on the
artillery, got some information on the patterns they had fired, and headed for Beam's track. He threw the handset to the black NCO and Beam grinned his thanks.

"Get up here, sir," Beam yelled.

Mike climbed the side of the thick vehicle. Beam was excited, pointing and yelling, "Look out there, out there!" Three men were crawling away from the perimeter, less than one hundred meters out. Funny no one else could see them, but then the whole goddam field was visible from the higher vantage point.

Mike raised his CAR15, placed the switch on semi-automatic, and fired a tracer at one of the men. The crawling figures fell flat. He fired again, hit another, fired once more and dropped the third one. Just like Fort Benning's "On my tracer". It works without command. No sooner had Mike hit the third man when volleys rammed into the bodies, fired from others who had seen the targets. The firing was controlled, streams of tracers hitting the same spots from different angles.

"Thanks, James, that was a bonus. I'll see you later."

"Yessir, thanks for the handset."

"Don't forget where you got it. They're hard to come by."

He jumped off the track to go find Walker. Mike found his lieutenant on a front hole directing machinegun fire. Dammit! All the platoon leaders think they're squad leaders. He wasn't really angry. His mood was buoyant from the
killing he had done minutes before. Walker wasn't doing anything wrong. Mike watched the gunner and saw that his fires were placed too low, scattering ricochets skyward.

"Let me talk to you a minute."

Walker turned on his side, saw the company commander crouched behind him. "Good shootin'."

"Anybody hit?"

"No, sir. No one. We've been stackin' 'em up out there, though. Havin' a time of it." Walker's eyes glowed, feverish for more.

Mike watched green tracers coming from the woodline, others from the bare field. Mortars were no longer in-coming. A rocket brought both men together in a heap, hunkered behind the foxhole. The round landed near the carriers.

"Did you see anything of the LP's?"

"No, I don't think they were able to get in."

"Keep your eyes peeled, Jim. MacMillan has his arm all fucked up. We're gonna lose him. Wilson's running the platoon again. How's your ammo holding up?"

"We can use lots of ball and MIL. .50's are okay for now. The First Sergeant's been here already. Said he'd do what he could to get our stuff. We're gonna need more claymores, too. Shot all of 'em off soon's we saw they were on the wire."

"Okay. I'm gonna check with 46 now. If I get a call, relay. See ya."
Mike ran behind the safety of the tracks. He found Doc Garnet with four men laid out on the ground. One was still alive and Doc was tending him. The man's eyes were large and terrified. Both of his arms were nearly severed above the elbow, the forearms and hands hanging by ground meat and bone.

"What happened to them, Garnet?"

"This guy was part of a mortar crew. He got blown out of their pit. I found him laying over there," he tipped his head behind him, "and pulled him over here. These guys, one was a TC for the Cav and took a rocket in the chest. The other was one of our .50 gunners. I don't know about that other one. He was here when I got here."

Mike looked at the bodies, trying to identify the guy who had worked for him. The gray face was not familiar. The one hit by the rocket was split open, his chest almost completely blown away. The other gunner was missing the back of his head. The third man's leg was gone.

"How'd we do, sir?" It was the man whose arms were ripped, his voice pleading and high-pitched, like a child sorry he had been caught.

"We're doing all right. You guys were doing one hell of a job until you got hit. You did good work," Mike said, not knowing what kind of job the man had done. Considering his loss, it had to be good. Then to Garnet, "Doc, get this man out of here. Don't keep him here with these others. Take him somewhere else."
Mike headed for the weapons platoon. He talked with Diaz, determining the mortar platoon's profit and loss. Except for the lost gunner, no one else was hurt. Everything was in hand. He moved to the maintenance track, learning from Ordway that the two LP's on the Southwest side had returned safely over the wire.

"What? Over the wire?"

"Affirm. They climbed right over the goddam stuff. Hard as hell," Ordway said. "We thought first it was NVA and almost got 'em, but they yelled and we knew who it was. One of them said he'd shot two guys in his way getting back from their post. They're okay."

Two of eight got back safely. Mike went to Tallon Bravo's command post to see the CO or the major. He crossed near the weapons platoon pits that had been hit, saw the medics working on some men, and saw ponchos covering the bodies of others. He told one of the medics that his own medic had one of their guys and how badly he was wounded. He didn't find Tallon Bravo 6 or Tallon 5. No one knew where they were. Somewhere on the line, he was told.

He headed through his mess area, yelled for Chop Chop 6, and found the Mess Steward peering out of his tent hole. He said they were all right.

Mike went back to his track. Everything was under control. He climbed across the sandbags and sat in the helicopter seat ribbon-bolted to the top.
"Foley," he yelled, "climb in the ass end and fix my CVC and pass it to me through the hatch." Foley fixed the crewman's helmet and handed it to his CO. Mike called the company at large to indicate he was back at his CP, playing the necessary game—always let your men know where you are. He switched frequencies and called Tallon 6.

"We've got fourteen casualties, including KIA's, in the whole NDP. Can we get resupplied with ball, MLB, .50, and tank 90 millimeter stuff?" He had an estimate of the quantities needed. He received an affirmative answer and was told he should be ready to get assistance from the fly-boys. Artillery to be shifted to the East side of the perimeter. Control would revert to his FO until the air strike was concluded.

"Roger, I'll have that done immediately. I think the strikes should come in as follows: The first pass should be made on the West side from north to south; the next should go from east to west. Approaches should approach from the north in both cases to avoid our artillery." Mike hoped that the message was clear, then thought they'd figure something else out anyway.

"That's too risky. We'll call off the artillery before the Air Force comes in. No troubles that way. You can handle what's going on ground-wise, can't you?"

"Affirmative, things are slowing down."

"Okay, I'll call you later. The birddog will continue to control. He'll stop the artillery. I'll let you know
when the jets are coming in. I'm going to give you the gunships following the air strikes. Figure out where you want them. Have you seen Tallon 5 or my Bravo 6? I can't raise them."

"Negative. If I see them I'll let you know. I just made rounds and didn't see them."

The battalion commander was disgusted when he signed off, but Mike knew it wasn't directed at him. He checked his watch and saw that it was 0230 hours. This shit had been going on for almost one and a half hours and they were still receiving small arms and rockets. Unbelievable. Those guys didn't know when to quit.

He removed his CVC and jumped into the rear of the track. MacMillan was still there, Garnet rebandaging his arm. It was in the same shape as the other man's arms that Mike had seen shortly before, the 81mm gunner.

"Sir, let me go back to my company. I'm okay now."

The plea MacMillan made was hollow and Mike was tempted to tell the lieutenant to knock off the John Wayne crap. He didn't. Instead he asked Mac how he got hit.

"The M60 on that hole was jammed and I went over to help. Sergeant Wilson saw I didn't have a radio and he brought me one, is why he was there. The RPG hit just in front of the right aperture of the hole and sprayed us all. I guess the others are okay."

Mike thought better of asking why they had not been in the hole rather than on top. That was an arguable question.
There was something about being in a hole. They were hard
to see from, and equally as difficult to get out of if you
had to. Mike didn’t wholly disagree with the way they had
used it.

Mike climbed back on top, settled in his armored
chair, and waited for the artillery to cease. That would
indicate the air strike was coming in — necessary informa-
tion in the event Tallon 6 called late to inform him of
that fact. The fireworks were still going on. Mike called
the weapons platoon and told them to knock off firing.
Their fire had been effective when they could get their
rounds off, but they had been busy firing on the line with
machineguns, too. Nonetheless, they still managed to fire
nearly eighty rounds of 81mm.

He was only slightly higher than the ground when he sat
on his ACAV, but his visibility was excellent. He was glad
he had chosen the position because it gave him and his two
rifle platoons, not to mention Beam’s crews, the chance to
bear the brunt of the fight.

Four men suddenly appeared to his left, crouched, walk-
ing slowly. It was Tallon Bravo 6, Tallon 5, and two RTO’s.

"What are you doing over here? Get the hell back to
your area," Mike yelled at White. "You'll screw up the
machinegun fire." Mike was mad. He wasn't talking to the
major and the major knew it. Mike was pissed at the numb-
skull who refused to let his LP’s come in.

"We're taking a look around, if you don't mind," White
shouted back, his tone of voice indicating Mike had no right
to tell him what to do. The major said nothing.

"I'll tell you what, asshole. If you want your face
kept looking like it is, clear out. Otherwise, stick
around. Your battalion commander's been trying to reach you
for an hour."

The men stood straight up, as if nothing was being
fired in the area, the captain staring at Mike. The major
looked confused. The RTOs studied their handsets.

"Major Partkinson, if you don't mind, I'd like this
jerk to clear the hell out. Can you get him out of here?"

Without a word, the major grabbed the captain by the
arm and turned him in the opposite direction, gently pushing
him the other way. The RTOs followed.

"Would you have kicked his ass, 6?" Foley was smiling
up from the driver's hatch, talking to Mike over the inter-
com.

"Goddam rights! He's an asshole! I can't get those
LP's out of my mind." Mike remembered he had deliberately
failed to mention the LP's to Tallon 6. He probably knew,
anyway. Let Tallon Bravo 6 handle the problem.

"Taurus Bravo 6, Tallon 6, you'll have air strikes in
time minutes. They'll come in as you advised. They'll make
three passes in each direction. If you need more, let me
know. Report to me as they come in. I want to know how
they do."
Even as he replied, Mike heard Tallon Bravo 6 trying to break in on the conversation. Tallon 6 chewed his ass and told him to wait. Mike rogered the last transmission and sat back to wait the strike, notifying his command as he rested.

The strikes came in as planned, dropped butterfly bombs and two hundred pounders, finished their loads, and made last passes with their 20mm cannon. Mike thought it would have all been more impressive had they arrived an hour before, but then you could lose airplanes that way. Shit, you're just jealous, he told himself. You'd like to change places with them.

When the jets left, Mike was given a heavy team of gunships to strafe the battlefield. The helicopters farted their mini-gun tracers in short order - two thousand rounds per minute. The flight leader asked Mike where he wanted the rockets. Mike directed them to the tree line to the north running parallel to the road where he suspected indirect fire crews had set up earlier. Their rockets expended, Mike reverted them back to Tallon's control.

It was nearly 0400 hours. Mike asked Tallon about re-supply and dustoffs. He was told they could come in any time. Good, bring them right in. Mike called his 10 and told the commo chief to have 7 report to him. The E-8 appeared within a minute.

"Top, they're bringing in ammunition and dustoffs right away. Go set it up. Use the medics and any other
man you can find to help you, except for those manning holes, radios and guns."

"Where do you want me to mark for them?" asked the senior NCO.

To himself Mike said figure it out, Top, but aloud he said, "On the other side of the NDP. Not much action there and a hell of a lot more room. Right behind Ordway's maintenance."

The First Sergeant left without another word and Mike was genuinely pleased with Ayers during the last few hours. Not normally an innovative man, he had needed no prodding when things started happening, unlike his earlier posing.

Mike jumped off the ACAV and walked to Candy's cubbyhole.

"They're giving the guns back to me," Candy greeted him. "Where do you want them?"

"Extend them beyond what you've been shooting at. I know birddog did that but I want you to saturate that area out there. With as many guys hitting us as there were," he said, acknowledging to himself that they were not receiving in-coming rounds of any sort, "there have to be lots more in the woods. Just walk them up and down out there."

He asked for final counts on losses, weapons, vehicle hits, and issued resupply information. There were to be no medevacs unless approved by Doc Garnet. Might not have anybody left in the NDP if they all left. There were many superficial wounds but they could be cared for here.
Sitting in his topside chair, Mike reflected on the fight. It seemed finished before muscle could be flexed, but he knew hours had passed and they had flexed enough muscle. Still, something had been too mechanical about it. Perhaps he was expecting it to have been more dramatic, more personal. Those goddam LP's. No listening posts would fall asleep on their post for sometime to come. Why is it necessary to find good in the bad. Save it for philosophers, not soldiers.

The sky was brightening without the aid of flares, which in any case, had stopped falling with the aid of their small parachutes. The sky was drab but brighter than the chemical illumination, and that was comforting. Mike listened to the WHOMP of Candy's artillery. He wondered idly why the other company's forward observer wasn't assisting Candy, then thought, fuck 'em, who needs 'em.

He wanted to send Foley for iced tea or coffee, then went himself. Thirty yards to the mess tent.

"Foley, when they start calling in their reports, write it down. I'll get us some juice."

Enroute he paused to watch MacMillan walk toward the dustoff choppers. The evacuations and resupply would be completed soon. He doubted if anyone was left out there to take potshots at the ships. He returned to the ACAV. Messy. Things were thrown around. "Foley, let's start cleaning up. I'll take the calls." Foley shook his head.

"Quite a night, sir, quite a night!"
"Yeah, and I suppose the rest of the day will be a lot harder. Fuck it, Teddy. Forget the mess for now. Go get us something to eat. Get what you can. Shake Chop Chop's ass and tell him we're hungry."

Foley smiled and turned to go, but not before Mike saw the blood on his hand.
PART III

CHAPTER FROM A NOVEL
The general sat alone in his encampment less than three kilometers from the mountain-side perimeter. He was working on a map of an area the Americans named War Zone C, scrutinizing particularly the area near which Marion had been captured. The general thought it would be a stroke of genius to release Marion in that same vicinity. It would serve to show the Americans that they had no control over the land, that the People were able to move at will over any of the country. That would be part of the coup de main, the proof that the Central Office controlled the country no matter how many Americans were stationed there.

He made notes on a small paper pad, recorded some coordinates, then marked the positions on the map hanging from the bunker wall. Finished marking, he lined the dots together. He had planned the route Major Tanh would use to return Marion to South Viet Nam, and ultimately to his divisional units on Highway 13.

Marion was nearly ready to be returned and the general prided himself on his work. He thought his plan had the stuff to make him one of the most respected men in the war effort. He planned to bend the truth slightly for his personal cause. He would tell his superiors after the fact that he had ordered the capture of an American officer by
employing specially trained units, and he personally prepared Marion for his role in the scheme. No one of his leaders knew of the general's plans, and, of course, no one knew of the small role his subordinates played. He would tell others about the execution of the plans after they had been put into effect. He would become a national hero once his international maneuver had been made famous by Marion. The credit would go to him. His superiors would then take note of his personal skills, perhaps elevate him to higher office in the Party, perhaps even allow him to return to his northern homeland from which he had been ordered so many years before. Major Tanh would get no credit for planting the seed of the scheme by capturing Marion entirely of his own volition. Tanh would receive the small tribute he deserved.

The general wiped black grease pencil from his fingers with a small rag, mildly irritated that he was forced to maintain secrecy by performing such menial tasks as recording routes on a map. A less dignified person should be doing this for him. His irritation lessened somewhat as he realized that even minor details had to be done with the utmost care. He trusted no one in assisting him in this project. Except, to a point, Major Tanh faithfully guarding Marion on the hill.

Tanh must be promoted when this is over. Tanh had performed well, had become friendly with the ignorant American. That kind of mutual trust would even help serve his purposes.
Marion would consciously be forced to say good things about his captivity, things that had not been fed into his mind to be recited like a school lesson.

He looked at objects on the table. They were the items of clothing taken from Marion after his capture. They had been repaired for him, sewn and cleaned. The general had even seen to it that Marion's boots were cleaned and waxed. He picked up one of the boots, inspected it, and admired the American-made article. He knew the sole was spike proof, the Americans having much publicized that fact when the boot was marketed for wear in Viet Nam. Those Americans! How foolish to worry about mere punji stakes when they should have been worrying about supply lines from the North. If they only knew the amount of equipment being supplied for the major assault!

He put the boot back on the table and fingered the fatigue jacket, admiring the quality of the material. Inside, a tag read: COAT, MAN'S, COMBAT, TROPICAL. He smiled at the terminology, finding it entirely backward. He noted the stitching in the jacket. It had been repaired to his satisfaction. The bullet holes and bloodstains were gone. Tanh's men had switched jackets with Marion and an unfortunate dead American soldier as a matter of deception. He thought Tanh had botched that part of the switch when he received Tanh's after-action report. Tanh's men had not placed Marion's jacket on the dead man before they left the ambush site. There had been no time for it, according to
Tanh. But that did not matter now. None of that would matter and would eventually become known.

Satisfied that Marion's equipment was prepared, he opened a calendar notebook. It, along with his notes made during his sessions with Marion, would someday make a great bit of historical military reading. Together they formed a diary of many of his accomplishments, including Marion's capture.

He checked the dates, mentally noting the number of days he had held his prisoner. Eighty-eight days. He remembered the intelligence reports after the ambush, and he remembered he had been pleased when there had been no mention made by the Americans of anyone having been captured. They thought Marion was dead. Marion would be returned, a man from the grave. In a way, it was a gift for him. Tanh had told the general how well Marion's men had fought. Let this be Marion's gift for being a good soldier.

In three days Tanh and his men would use the route he had recorded to return Marion to American control. Tanh would be surprised when told about the part he would play in Marion's return. He would not be told until the day they were to leave.

Marion's return is necessary now. It will coincide with the great Winter/Spring Offensive, an onslaught the Americans will never forget. Combined with Marion telling Americans his views on the war and how well he had been treated, it will not be long before the invaders are gone.
for good. They will have to leave Viet Nam. They will be forced to leave at the will of their own civilians. It will work for our unification and it will work for me. I planned and executed it all.

One more session with Marion tomorrow and I will give Tanh his mission order the following day. Yes, Colonel Marion, I will owe you very much!

Tanh and Marion were seated in the Oriental's bunker, each man verbally sparring with the other, each afraid to place complete confidence in the other. On their walk through the jungle that day Tanh had surprised Marion. He stopped abruptly and said, "We will talk tonight of what you mentioned before, Colonel." With those few words he began walking again on the open path with his hands clasped behind his back, appearing as if he had no concern for what he had just said. The reverse was true.

Marion stood dumbfounded, disbelieving what he had just heard. He ran to Tanh's side, started to grab his arm but stopped his action, afraid the guards might misinterpret his movement.

"You mean about getting out of here, Major Tanh?" he asked, fearful that the answer would be a negative one.

"Yes, that is what I mean. I am ready to help you. And I help myself, too. My life has become empty and I am
ready to help. Keep walking, Colonel. Act as you always act," the major chided. "We will talk tonight. You will be brought to me."

When they were back at the compound Marion was unable to think of anything else. He could not eat, he went through his exercise program for the second time that day, and he waited for one of Tanh's men to bring him to their rendezvous in the bunker a short distance away.

When he was finally called for in the early evening, Marion was intense. He felt as if he were walking into a trap and he was wary on his way to the bunker. He expected something unusual to happen to him on the way. But nothing did happen, and he sat facing Tanh minutes later, still not entirely convinced he was not blundering into an inextricable snare.

Tanh, seeing the apprehension in Marion's face, felt his own tensions relax. The strain was much like two antagonists meeting finally for the handshake which would erase a long-standing feud. Tanh had reached the point of no return and he felt he must initiate the proceedings.

"Colonel, I know this is difficult for both of us. Please be easy," Tanh said, attempting to lesson the anxiety they both felt in their decisive moment. "I have given much thought to your idea. Shall we talk?"

Marion saw friendly understanding in Tanh's eyes, saw that he was leveling with him. His fears vanished. He decided to trust the other man.
"Major Tanh, are you sure you want to do this? Do you mean what you say?" Marion asked for qualification.

"Yes, I mean what I say."

"Let's shake on it then." Almost comically, both men rose and extended their hands across the rough-cut table, sealing an agreement like two thieves.

Marion came to the point. "Major, the way I figure it, if we can take one of our walks alone soon, we can get at least a three hour head start in getting out of here. Can you order your men to leave us alone when we walk?"

"That is not difficult. My men will do as I say, much as your men would do for you, I think. I have thought much, too. I think we can get no more than three hours. I agree with you. I have a route planned. I want you to look at it." Tanh produced a small non-military road map of Southeast Asia. It included all the major road networks in South Viet Nam, and part of Laos and Cambodia. He explained his use of the map simply. "You know we could never carry maps of detail for our entire route. They would be too bulky. I have marked where we are located." He pointed to a spot he had made with a pencil.

Marion stared, seeing for the first time where he was actually located. His first thought was self-deprecatory. He found they were nowhere near where he had estimated. Hundreds of times. He had thought they were further north. They had actually marched west. He continued to look at the map, drawn into the pastels indicating the separate countries
and the sea. He would never have to see the map again to verify where they were. The information was etched indelibly in his mind in those first few minutes. He scanned the escape route marked on the map and then realized Tanh was speaking.

"... so you can see we merely have to make our way east and we will be on Highway 13. There will be much risk but I know most of the way. I may have even fought against you in that area, Colonel," Tanh admitted for the first time in their relationship. He pointed to Loc Ninh, South Vietnam.

"If you did, you were a worthy opponent, Major," Marion replied respectfully. "Can you get us a radio to use when we are near Highway 13? I know we can contact American units easily if we have a radio."

"I will try but I do not think so. For now we must concern ourselves with evasion when we leave. I think it would do if we prepare from the beginning," Tanh said, obviously still in charge.

He proceeded to outline his plan. He would provide each of them with a rifle and ammunition. They would have to move very quickly, of course, and any other equipment would slow them down. Each of them would also carry a canteen. Unless they could enter a "safe" area to replenish their water, one canteen would have to be enough for three days and nights. Tanh would have a compass, the only one. It would be too suspect if he attempted to collect another as
their supplies were limited and strictly accounted for. Each would wear the uniform of the North, including a pith helmet. If they were stopped Tanh would move forward to converse. Marion would stay behind and prepare to lay a base of fire if necessary. They would not leave for another day and a half. The general was expected the next day. The day following, they would leave. Tanh had decided not to inform Marion of the hypnotic sessions until they were safely away. Tanh's reference to the Doctor as general did not register on Marion.

"What time will he be here tomorrow?" Marion wanted to know.

"I do not know. He will be here, that is all I know. He does not tell me his agenda. If you are thinking of tomorrow to leave, do not. There will be no time. We must wait for the next day. He does not come two days in a row."

"How about tomorrow night then?" Marion was anxious.

"We need the time we can gain by waiting, Colonel. We will wait. Tomorrow I will find a way to store out equipment. It will not be easy to do. I will put them inside the temple. You know the way there as well as I. It will not be easy for me to get there carrying two rifles, but I have a way of doing it. You do not know, Colonel, but this is the center compound of a larger ring of camps. I have more than three hundred men near here. There are others."

"How many others?" Marion asked, storing information for the debriefings he knew he would undergo when he returned.
"I will tell you when we get out safely, Colonel. I need to have some assurances for my safety once we reach your people. Do you not agree?"

"Yes, I agree," Marion said, abashed that he had not been concerned with Tanh's safety. "What will we do to prevent being shot by my people once we get close to them? Suppose we are mistaken for North Vietnamese?" The possibility suddenly alarmed Marion. What if he died at the hands of Americans by mistake?

"I leave that up to you, Colonel," Tanh said, his face turning into a smile. "That is for you to decide. I will do things from this side."

Marion became introspective, thinking of possibilities to avoid being killed by his own troops. He restudied the map, unable to solve the problem. He knew if he got out he would be examined on his knowledge of the area. If he got out - alive. His mind was definitely made up. He was going to leave. Rain, mud, shit, or blood, he was going to leave. And, as a bonus, he was returning with a willing prisoner in the form of a North Vietnamese field grade officer.

"Colonel, you will return to your area. We will see how our plans look to us in the light of a new day." He turned and faced a wall, a strange practice of Tanh's. It served as dismissal.

As he left, the impact of what Tanh was doing hit Marion squarely. He walked to his jail with his escort thinking of Tanh's decision. It was impossible for Marion
to reverse positions with Tanh in his mind's eye. He could never do what Tanh was willing to do. He settled beneath his small roofed shelter and automatically reached for the small bag of tiny rocks he had accumulated. Unconsciously, he counted them. His mind was on more important things but he knew he had eighty-eight pebbles, each not much larger than a B-B. He would finish counting with ninety. The number burned in his mind. Ninety days.

After the general had seen Marion and had gone, Tanh visited his co-conspirator in his small fenced-in perimeter. The visit, like many of the others Tanh had made, was not unusual to any of Tanh's men who moved freely around their encampment. No one paid any attention to either man as they sat cross-legged and discussed their plans again in full view of the gate guard. He stood only ten feet away, but his language barrier prevented him from understanding the discussion, a deficiency which would not be missed later by the general.

"Colonel, our walk tomorrow will begin about two o'clock in the afternoon. When we fail to return it will be dark before an alarm is sounded. We will have much advantage by moving at night. Our destination will be guessed, but we will gain more time by moving in the difficulty of night."
"How about the rifles? Have you got them stashed yet? And the water?"

"I will do that tonight. They will be provided in much the same manner as your own disappearance. I know you have been trained in night movement in the jungle so I will say nothing to you about that. But you must understand that I do not know where all of our units are located."

Tanh was embarrassed by this admission, feeling that Marion would expect him to have that kind of information. And not having it, he felt he would be degraded in Marion's opinion of him.

"Who could be expected to know things like that, Major?" Marion understood Tanh's feelings of inadequacy. He explained, "None of us at our level could possibly have that information. Besides, knowing how lost my people seem to be at times, I doubt if any of your generals know where all their troop displacements are at all times either." Marion grinned at Tanh to show him that he understood. Tanh accepted the statement.

Tanh got to his feet and signaled the guard to let him out. Marion watched him leave, rolling the eighty-ninth rock between his fingers and his thumb, smoothing its roughness. Marion felt there was something he should be doing to prepare for the escape, but there was nothing to do. He worked the rest of the afternoon strengthening the draw strings on his rock sack. He would tie them to his trousers so they wouldn't be lost. He idly passed the time.
Tanh returned to his bunker and called for one of his men. The man had earned a few days rest, Tanh would tell him. The man was to be used in their plans. He had picked one of the more incompetent men in his command, not wanting to have to do what was necessary to a good man, one who had rightfully earned a rest. The man, a moon-faced Chinese mixture, appeared, and reported formally to his commanding officer. Facing the unit trouble maker, Tanh told him that for behaving so well for the last few weeks, he was going to get a leave. If he wished, he could find his way to a village within a day's walk and remain there for the duration of his leave. He could leave as soon as his equipment was approved in an inspection. Tanh dismissed him to ready his equipment. The soldier was happy with his good fortune and hurried away to prepare. Tanh counted on him to tell his platoon members of his luck.

When the soldier returned, Tanh made a brief inspection of the man. He then handed him a written pass, going through the motions with the young man. Tanh told him he would walk to the bottom of the hill with him and they left the perimeter together. As they did so, some of the men who knew the soldier yelled obscenities, each of them exhorting their comrade to plant a seed for them and other nonsense.
The soldier replied good naturedly that he would do his best. Soon they were out of sight.

Tanh mentioned that they should stop at the temple for a few moments before the man was on his way. The happy man Tanh had picked was noted for his learnings toward Buddhism.

When the soldier knelt before the destroyed pagoda, Tanh broke his neck with the butt of his rifle. The man went down with the sound of bone snapping, punctuating the thud. Tanh quickly dragged him out of sight behind the building and stripped him of his equipment. He stored both rifles, the man's canteen, and stripped him of his shirt.

The man had been carefully chosen. His size was similar to Tanh's, and though his face was much wider, it would make no difference. Satisfied that the equipment was well hidden, Tanh turned the dead man over on his back. He picked up a broken piece of lumber from the pagoda's debris and began pounding the moon-faced man's face, successfully breaking the skin and mutilating the bone. The face was completely disfigured. In his final murderous act, Tanh hoisted a large rock and smashed it into the dead man's face. Then he covered the body with rocks and boards, arranging it so the body could be easily uncovered the next day when he and Marion returned.

The job done, Tanh returned to the base of the hill and began climbing. He hoped no one would notice that he was now without a rifle. He still wore his pistol and his natural appearance would be noticed, if anything. When he
entered the perimeter he was met with some good-natured insults for having permitted a slouch, the moon-faced man, to go on leave. Tanh smiled at the ribbing and walked straight to his bunker, preferring not to engage anyone in conversation. He had things to think about.

The two men walked as they normally did, but this time their usual escort was absent from their routine duties. None of the soldiers had thought it important that they were not required to accompany their commander on his daily walk with the American. They were used to the American's presence. Only one of the soldiers remarked about how Tanh was getting careless in his ways. Hadn't it seemed strange to allow the unit misfit to take leave? Isn't it unusual that no one is escorting Major Tanh while he's with the prisoner? But his concern was ignored by the other men. None of them had any idea of what was taking place.

Tanh wore two of his own shirts, complete with insignia. When they reached the pagoda, they dressed the dead man in one of them. Marion at once knew the significance of why he had been wearing an enlisted man's shirt after his capture. He said nothing about it to Tanh. The scheme needed no explanation.

They left the dead man uncovered this time, hoping he would be found. They uncovered their hidden rifles and
canteens and walked slowly for more than twenty minutes. Marion was uncomfortable in the small pith helmet which had belonged to the moon-faced dead man. He felt slightly nauseated about wearing it. But he had only nodded his understanding when Tanh had handed it to him.

When Tanh felt they were out of immediate danger, they began running. Their first burst of speed was slowed to a jog when Marion became short of breath. Tanh showed no signs of tiring. Marion called on memories of his Airborne and Ranger training to establish a physical reserve to combat his exhaustion. After they had jogged a half hour or more, Tanh slowed to a fast walk. They were in lower terrain and the thicker jungle growth made the going much more difficult. Soon their fast walk slowed to a more cautious and practiced jungle movement.

Darkness came and both men pushed on. They could rest in the morning. It was important for them to get out of the area so dominantly controlled by the North Vietnamese. Tomorrow would bring different problems. Tanh, not knowing all of the controlled country they were to cross, was being very cautious, moving more slowly than Marion liked even though the American was tired. They traveled the remainder of the night without interruption, but both men were worried that their disappearance would soon be noticed. Although Tanh had not made arrangements for them to have a radio, they both fantasized on what kind of transmissions would be
out-going on the enemy frequencies: Look for an escaped American prisoner. Find him at all costs.

Both men thought they were within the borders of Viet Nam. It would be doubly difficult to elude people. They would have to be on the alert for not only North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces in the foothills, but American forces searching the region as well. They had traveled throughout the night without confronting anyone, had rested for more than five hours into noon the day after their escape, and were ready to continue.

Marion admired the grace with which Tanh moved through the rugged terrain, almost monkey like, tirelessly hopping, running, and flitting through clearings, tangled vines, and up and down hills equally well. For his part, Marion had required frequent rest stops of a few minutes in order to catch his stride, as if the short delays would enable his spirit to scout ahead searching for danger. Rested, both men would begin moving silently.

"Major, dammit, we could have made better time if we had gone South to Katuma." Marion's exhaustion was angering him. "Why didn't we do that?" He gasped for breath in a small depression in the earth.

"You know the people better the way we are going. When we get there we will both be better off," Tanh answered
calmly, perspiration drenching his uniform. "I know this route better also." Tanh reached to fold the small road map, placed it in his jacket pocket, and once again both men moved off.

They climbed the crest of a small hill to get a view of their surroundings. What they saw alarmed Tanh. The scene below told him he had not been careful enough. He had not expected this.

A cluster of huts, perhaps twenty or more, were set into the valley bottom. Hills stretched upward on the far side. A small stream flowed less than one hundred and fifty meters below. The village, as much of it as they could see, squatted on the far side of the stream. They were not yet in South Viet Nam as they had thought. Tanh hesitated in telling Marion what he had just perceived.

Marion, on his belly next to Tanh, used the dalay to catch his breath again. When he was breathing easily, he spoke.

"Do you know that place, Major?"

"Yes, I know it. We have made a mistake. We are not yet across the border. That hamlet is part of a larger village. Others are on each side. We can't see them from here. It will be difficult to cross here." Tanh wiped his sleeve across his mouth and reached for his canteen. It was half full. He swigged some water in his mouth, washed it around with his tongue, then spit. He took a small drink
and passed the container to Marion. The American had used up his own water.

Marion was grateful for Tanh's gesture. He would not have asked to share Tanh's water.

"There's another problem," Tanh continued. "My . . . my former troops stopped here often in the night for supplies and rest. There may be soldiers here now."

Both men scanned the hamlet looking for young men. They could see children playing on the bank of the stream and others were tending a few old buffalo. No adults were evident.

"Perhaps they are waiting for us," Tanh said.

"Do any of these people know you, Major?" Marion asked.

"Yes. A few. If they have been warned about you, they will be watching."

"How are we going to cross this valley?"

"I can try to talk with those children. I will tell them I am a lost soldier. They will respect an officer. Wait here. I will go see. If we can get through, I will wave from where those children play near the water. You join me if I wave."

Tanh slid over the top of the hill on his belly, was lost for a few minutes in the trees, and finally Marion saw him approaching the band of kids. They expressed no alarm at seeing him approach. They were curious and they moved to meet Tanh, wading the small creek. Marion watched Tanh
gesturing as he spoke with the kids. Then Tanh turned and waved his hand back and forth over his head. Marion started downhill. Tanh met him before the kids could see him. He carried a handful of mud. He slapped it on Marion's face and hands wordlessly. Marion understood the disguise. Tanh indicated by hand signal for Marion to follow and both men crossed the stream.

They were met by the kids again, all of whom were curious, more so since Marion's greater height was added to the charade. Tanh led Marion quickly to the far side of the huts where the hill sloped upward.

"Wait!" he whispered. Marion squatted and waited, trying to look casual to the kids who continued to watch him, chattering at him. Marion's senses were alert for adults, particularly uniformed ones.

Tanh and one small boy were gone only a short time. They returned with a water bag and a cloth bag, both of which Tanh carried. He turned to the boy and thanked him. He nodded his head to Marion and both men began climbing the hill. Marion slipped in his haste, and while getting back to his feet, he noticed the figure of an adult male slip inside a doorway. They had been seen by someone other than children.

When they were halfway up the hill, Tanh began side-hilling, following a path he seemed to know. The village was out of sight. Marion stopped Tanh.
"Someone was watching us, Major. I saw him move into a house."

"I saw him, too, Colonel. We must hurry. These people have ways of transmitting our passage. The boy who gave me these things asked about you. He had never seen a man of your height before." Tanh turned and walked at a fast pace.

Marion scanned the valley below them to the right and could see another hamlet less than a half mile from the one they had just left. He could see a rice field being worked by adults in the valley bottom, one previously hidden from view. His pace quickened to match Tanh's.

"I am sorry. I thought we had crossed the border, Colonel," Tanh said, reproaching himself. "Our route was strange to me even though I have been through here before. I did not think we should use completely familiar trails. We have been paralleling ground familiar to me." Tanh smiled. "Colonel, by tomorrow afternoon we should be in your territory. We will rest for one more hour until the moon is high. Then we will have to go without stopping. It is positive we are being looked for."

Marion considered Tanh's remarks. It was the first time Tanh had mentioned "your" territory, as if he was finally admitting Americans controlled some of the country.
"Major Tanh, as tired as I am, I could run all the way if I had to." Both men slept after eating pieces of dried fish and each man shared a handful of mushy, cooked rice, cold from being stored in a cellophane bag which the village boy had supplied. The next hour passed quickly and Marion woke with Tanh's hand on his shoulder.

"It is time," Tanh said, and they began moving through the dense jungle almost back to belly in the darkness of the canopied growth.

Traveling through nights of tree-grabbing, heat-soaking, ankle-turning jungle, the mind turns off to the effects of almost everything outside the body. It turns inward, yet somehow takes external things into account. A daze sifts over the mind and concentration comes from exacting effort. Marion concentrated on the small agile form in front of him. For Tanh, the movements to his rear occupied him. Neither of them had suffered in a walk like this for months, pressured by time and worry, occupied by the things to which they were returning or leaving behind. Neither of them saw the flash of rifle fire to the side but each was instantly awake, pounding their bodies into the ground when the firing began. They both lay behind an anthill. Neither of them was hit. The rifle fire had been scattered and it died away with a shouted command when the ambushers received no
return fire. Marion and Tanh lay quietly, hoping the ambushers would think they had hit their marks.

Marion felt Tanh bring his rifle to a firing position, matching his own movement. They lay still for a few minutes, neither side making a sound. Someone made his way toward them, softly brushing the bush as he approached. Tanh was bold. He yelled in Vietnamese, "Who is there?"

The approaching figure stopped, shouted an answer, and Tanh nervously laughed aloud, and spoke again, hoping to give the man confidence. The ruse worked. The man stood, his movement barely detectable at ten meters. He yelled to his comrades.

"They think I'm one of them. When I fire, start running."

Marion was ready, waiting for the first deadly burst. The man continued toward them cautiously. Noises indicated others were joining him. The first man waited again until he was joined by his comrades before continuing. Tanh had told them he was hit, had sworn at them for shooting their own people, but evidently they were not entirely convinced. Tanh and Marion could see the figures moving, occasionally outlined by thin beams of moonlight shining through the tall trees.

Tanh fired four quick bursts. Marion did likewise even though Tanh had told him to begin running. Tanh grabbed Marion's arm and pulled. Both began moving, running away from their targets. They could hear screaming in the night.
Each of the runners knew they had hit their marks. They were keenly aware that they might well be in the midst of a larger force, not just a small ambush.

They stopped thirty minutes later for air, their lungs aching. They waited until they began to breathe easy again, and to listen for movements. They heard none and Tanh checked his compass. Focusing on the glowing digits, he heard firing near where they had just missed being taken out themselves.

"I think they're just spooked now," Marion reassured him. "They're just firing at shadows."

Tanh did not answer. Instead he tugged at Marion's sleeve and moved off. He knew now they were in the vicinity of the infamous "Trail". Tanh led them on a southerly heading because he thought any pursuers would naturally look for them in the direction they had been traveling. It was a smart move, but their journey would be extended by the deviation.

They traveled non-stop the remainder of the night, only catching their breath and for compass readings. They continued moving into daylight. They rested for nearly three hours until the sun was high, and were once again underway. By mid-afternoon, they were within five miles of An Loc, south of their original destination of Loc Ninh. They were not sure of their exact location and didn't care, obsessed as they were with the simple desire to get to
Highway 13. They ate the rest of the dried fish they carried, enough to satiate their hunger.

Daylight brought evidence of their objective in an offhand way. In the sky they could see jet streams flowing behind planes. Once they were treated to the sight of a low-flying aircraft screaming at tree top level dropping "butterfly" bombs less than a mile away. Occasionally they heard the quick chop of rotar blades and Marion's tired body became alert at the sound of them.

Both men were exhausted and barely able to move. Marion's head ached intolerably.

"Take a rest, Tanh," he said, a semblance of his old command voice returning. They found a thick clump of trees to rest inside. Marion looked at his feet and was sickened at the sight. His toes were bleeding and he had a large cut across one of his heels. His ankles were swollen and cut. He looked at Tanh and saw that his face was devoid of concern even though his own feet were in similar condition. Their lips were parched and split. The last three days and nights had dehydrated both of them and they had discarded their worthless containers. Marion threw his pith helmet on the ground and rubbed his head, then lay back on the ground. Tanh remained seated against a tree, resting, but watchful.

Marion turned his head to look at Tanh and saw Tanh's head turn abruptly, as if he heard something move. Marion sat upright, then got to his knees, staying low. He looked
in the same direction and listened intently. He heard it, too. It was the sound of men moving toward them, unmistakably the sound of a large group movement in the brush. They remained quiet. The first man came into view.

They were dressed in the same uniform Tanh and Marion wore. They were moving in a single-file column, heedlessly making quick time in the dense woods. They were in a hurry and had no security men on their flanks. They were going somewhere fast, to hell with security. Marion moved slowly closer to Tanh for a better look. When he moved, he kicked the helmet he had thrown on the ground. One of the men in the column only yards away heard the small out of place noise. He stopped and dropped to the ready position. His action triggered a like response from most of the men behind him.

Marion and Tanh heard them speaking.

"What did they say?" Marion asked in a whisper.

"They are going to come," Tanh responded. They saw three men leave the main body of North Vietnamese Regulars, heading straight for them.

Marion opened fire first and Tanh followed suit. They dropped all three men and the others, still unable to see Tanh and Marion, opened fire at random when they saw their comrades fall. Tanh and Marion began crawling hastily and when the trees gave them more protection, they began running. Tanh turned and shot another burst in the direction of their hunters and was out of ammunition. He didn't bother with
his pistol. He threw his rifle to the side while Marion emptied his weapon in the same direction, expending his load, and he, too, threw his rifle away. Both men ran as fast as the jungle allowed. They could hear crashing behind them, men breaking through the jungle, men who wanted to kill.

Fear drove them faster and harder than their would-be assailants. On the move, Marion heard a chopper overhead and knew they had all been detected. He heard the chopper open fire on the people behind and was dismayed that the pilots were only using a small observation helicopter, an LOH 13, and they were only firing with M16's.

They continued to run, Marion hoping they had been seen being chased by the North Vietnamese, and also hoping he was not mistaken for one of them. He dreaded the possibility. After his long ordeal he might be killed by Americans.

The chopper climbed higher and Marion realized they were not being followed by the men on the ground. He and Tanh began walking slowly and cautiously again, each of them looking for an opportunity to identify themselves in some way to the chopper's occupants. Marion decided not to even think of what would happen if artillery rounds started coming. They continued moving slowly. Straining, Marion heard the unmistakable roar of diesel engines. Armored personnel carriers! He stifled a shout of happiness and waved to Tanh to follow him toward the sound.
The noise of men could be heard through the jungle. Marion stopped, dumbfounded as to how to identify himself. Tanh moved to his side. An American GI opened fire on them. Marion dove for the ground with Tanh landing alongside. Marion trembled uncontrollably. He heard ugly sucking sounds coming from Tanh's body and he knew Tanh was hit.

"Please don't shoot! Please don't shoot!" Marion began yelling. "Pleeeaaase? Don't shoot." He sobbed, unable to think of anything else to say.

Shortly, an American captain offered Marion a can of pop in the rear compartment of an armored personnel carrier, simultaneously calling for a med-evac. None of what was happening seemed important to Marion. His relief at being safe had not yet overcome his concern for Tanh. Tanh was dead. He had died in Marion's arms. Marion could not remember much of what had happened after that. He could only think of Tanh. Someone had given Marion Tanh's pistol but Marion didn't even remember that. Things had happened so quickly.

They were joined by another lieutenant colonel, a battalian commander and acquaintance of Marion's. Together they watched a helicopter land to evacuate Marion and his dead companion. No one said anything out of concern for Marion. He boarded the ship and sat staring at Tanh's lifeless form, thrown in a heap on the deck of the chopper.
PART IV

NEW JOURNALISM
THE GAY NINETIES

No one even talks of Jake's anymore, not in bar-gossipy tones, like if they're talking about the Flame Lounge, the Stockman's, the Top Hat, and other well-known watering holes. Because Jake's Bar isn't around anymore. I mean it was gone in 1962 or thereabouts. And I miss it.

Jake's was the place where all the old heads used to meet at eight o'clock for pre-game "warm-ups". We met there before the games to drink ourselves into a stupor before the one o'clock kick-off because the way we were dressed almost required we get drunk; in those days few of us dressed differently except to show we were going to make a scene. And we did. Make scenes, that is. We met as the Kams and Dregs, a male/female group (take note of the lack of discrimination, Worry Warts, the girls went through the same initiation ritual as the guys by drinking large quantities of beer as penalty for reciting some long-forgotten riddle improperly in the Baby Oval when it was still legal to park cars there). What the Kams and Dregs did was to go to the games and yell raunchy and obnoxious cheers, the worst we could get away with in Dornblazer Stadium which sat center-mass between the present University Center and the Library. We also wore strange hats. The stranger the better. My favorite All-Time Hat was worn by a fat girl. It was a
spiked Prussian helmet, a silver one, with a gold spike, and the sides of the helmet had gold inlays spiraling on the sides. Good hat!

The initiation ceremonies usually occurred about four a.m. at the Baby Oval. I guess the authorities left us alone because it was traditional and I think they came to want to hear about our loud, early-morning fun. The girls lived by one a.m. rules but the Dean of Women's authority was circumvented by each of the girls who wanted to become One Of Us; they merely signed out for the weekend to visit their local aunt's house and other non-existent places. From the start, we'd stock up on our favorite brands of Happy Hops at Worden's or Olson's and when the supply was exhausted, we'd open Jake's. Jake expected us, like bad weather accompanying football season.

Since it was difficult to get served in Missoula bars before you were twenty-one, Jake's was the place to go. Except on the occasions when we invaded Jake's in this manner, his bar was usually filled with the local wino trade. Why else open at eight in the morning? As a result, the local cops never badgered us unduly. We thought we were, in short, acceptable fun-loving college students who were going to lend our team a hand in their quest for last place in the Skyline Conference. We helped in large measure because I remember the coach being quoted in Sports Illustrated saying something like "We should have a better team next year. We've only got nine games scheduled." This on the heels of
a 0-10 won-loss record. He was right. The next season the Fabulous Fizzlies went 1-8, just as Coach Jenkins said. Of course, the Kams and Dregs took credit for assisting in achieving such dismal records.

But forgive me. I want to get back to Jake's for a minute because his establishment is central to my story.

Jake's sported the only real swinging doors I have ever been through. I mean I've been through bars and restaurants which had swinging doors, but these were Real Old Original. Everything about Jake's was the real thing. His booths were high-backed wood frames without cushions and the tables were the old scarred-stabbed-written-on-stained-sturdy-cigaret-burned kind which are imitated in every Rustic Setting of today's chrome world. Jake's pool table was a real one with net pockets and even if he did finally install a dime skill-pool table, the pool table was one of those that weighed tons, with real slate, and if everything else in the place was stained with wet-glass-bottom rings and inch long yellow-black cigaret stains, the green felt of the pool table was immaculate. The bar, the plank itself, was a match for the booths. Real wood. Forget the plastic leather elbow rests and formica woodgrain. This was a bar. And behind the bar was the magic stuff: tap Highlander beer at a dime a glass for a sixteen ouncer. Could you pass up a deal like that?

Once I angered Jake by spilling my glass on the bar. A full glass. Jake didn't like that because I had just
argued him out of a free beer - every third one free, right? - then I spilled it, accidentally. Jake, who was around a hundred and eighty years old at the time, came around the far end of the plank in a second and grabbed me by the seat of my pants and the collar of my Kams and Dregs white shirt (the other part of the costume), and heaved me through the real swinging doors, head first.

I didn't fall down, friends, I just sort of scooted on my elbows until I came to a complete stop on the far side of the alley, ripping my one and only Ivy-League button-down white shirt at the elbows. (I later wore that same shirt to the Sigma Chi Sweetheart Ball, the only white one I had, and I wore those button-down points proud with my snap-on purple bow tie, set off nicely by my seven-fifty-for-the-night rented Tuxedo from Angelo's Men's Store.)

I picked my young body off the alley, brushed myself off, and re-entered the bar. I had an audience. It expected me to maintain my perfectly good Bad-Ass reputation, even though I no longer wore a Princeton haircut. Voices hushed, the silence broken only by the squeak of the hinges on the doors swinging to my rear. ("Whatever happened to Randolph Scott?") I looked at Jake. He was standing behind the bar ready to pull the tap handle to fill another sixteen-ouncer, his wisened marble-blue eyes meeting mine. I stood there, elbows bleeding, my good shirt torn. Then I broke the silence by yelling at all my compatriots, "Fuck alla ya!")

When you're thrown out of a bar by an eight-thousand year
old man, what else can you do? I walked to the bar amidst the cheers and jeers and before I could order another beer, Jake handed me the one he had just filled and told me, "Don't spill anymore beer in here, kid, or you're goin' out the fuckin' door again."

I hope you have caught the flavor of Jake's Bar. I just wanted you to get to know the place, to know I was there, one of the regular before-game customers whose duty it was to get plastered and go yell my head off for a losing football team.

I wanted you to know I was familiar with it because when it was remodeled as the Gay Nineties in 1962 or thereabouts, as I said, I felt a real loss. I guess everybody did, but what the hell, we were all going to leave sooner or later, either by flunking out of school or accumulating enough credits as an undergraduate to earn a doctorate, and we slowly accepted the fact that Jake's was no longer Jake's, but was now the Gay Nineties.

Well, along about then, I became a bartender so as to earn some shekels to feed the still-new wife and our soon-to-be-expected son. I worked some of my time at the Gay Nineties. I still had my fondness for Jake's place working for me, you could say, because I never did fully accept the remodeled joint as a replacement for my earlier Good Times. ("For the good times.") Besides, I was on the other side of the plank pouring loudmouth for the drunks. I was still
part of that scene for bits and pieces occasionally, but when you have to fend for other people, you don't get to make it as often. I started watching the booze go to work on people and realized what an ass we all make of ourselves, even if it's supposed to be in the spirit of the day, like cheering the hapless Grizzlies ever forward.

When my first-born arrived (a boy, as I figured, winning a few jugs of Jim Beam on bets), I took the day off. The guy who managed the Gay Nineties then was named Joe, and he was an underground-looking sort who, by his demeanor, didn't invite many customers back to the place. Anyway, I took the day off for celebrating and began the festivities with a free shot of some kind of dingleberry brandy given to me by Joe, though I could tell he would have been happier if I had offered to pay for the drink. I left, continued my spree on Woody Street with one of the football players who later died in a sky-diving mistake, and never went back. I even phoned to have my check sent to me before I left the state. I was near graduation, finally, and I never expected to even see the Gay Nineties again.

Well, I returned. Five years later. October, 1968. Leaning to the side, my feet flopping from "drop foot", but I returned nonetheless. ("When will they ever learn?") And where did I go? I went to the Nineties, where else? And they were there, many of the old habitue.

The bar hadn't changed; only the owners and managers had changed. The clientele was the same but it had increased
in numbers, friendly old faces all, and the gaudy shit that hangs on backbars in all Gay Nineties recreations still survived, including the neat touch of retaining Jake's swinging doors, just as I had last seen them, painted white, with an automatic shoe cleaner rubbing back and forth as I opened the door so as not to ruin the red rug. (Was everything red in the 1890's?)

The new owners/managers were OKAY, the only applicable accolade one can apply to great bar personnel who are not yet your friends, but have only begun ("We've only just begun.") to treat you like a regular customer. The women working there were wearing see-through white lace pantsuits, and both of them were nice people who knew their way around the bar life, good and bad. They had seen most everything that occurs in bars and weren't Easily Offended. Rather, they told their share of raunch jokes, et cetera, and joined in the laughter with the customers. The new ownership was, and is, one of those hidden ones, fronted by a corporate name, and the head honcho is the Commissioner of the Montana Board of Real Estate, but he has little to do with the day to day operation of the bar. The thing is, it didn't matter who worked the place, or who owned it. I still had my share, right? I mean, from Jake's on, man. I was a steady customer. A consoomer.

Then the strangest thing happened. I was asked to sing one night while sitting with my wife listening to Jim Dassinger, The Troubadour, perform. His voice wasn't the
greatest and I didn't need much encouragement to get up and do my stuff publicly, drunk as I was. After all, I was raised on Elvis Presley and once laid claim to knowing by heart all of Elvis' songs, not to mention Buddy's, Fats', Johnny's, Little Jimmy's, Webb's, Hank's, Carl's, Ferlin's, Chuck's, Harry's, Pat Boone's, Conway's, and The Platter's. I learned to hum on my thumb-sax Bill Dogget's Honky Tonk. I copied Bill Haily, Terry Gilkyson and the Easy Riders, Little Richard, and all them other greats from 1953 to 1963.

So, I stepped up to the microphone, grabbed Jim's three hundred dollar Martin, which he called his five hundred dollar Martin, and began strumming my three chords in the key of C (I could do E if I was strapped for more noises to accompany lung power on songs needing more volume) and sang my favorite Josh White version of Saint James' Infirmary.

Well, you couldn't say I brought the house down because there were only three couples of us in the place besides four or five regulars, but I did score, as evidenced by the free drinks I got in the next half hour, both from the house and the satisfied customers, most of whom bought them for me in commiseration, whereas I thought I was ready to be discovered. At the end of thirty minutes, or ten or twelve oldies-but-goodies, Jim asked for his guitar, and my moment escaped.

I had broken whatever ice remained to be broken. I was something of a novelty, if not a cause celebre, and later
in my "career", I sang on other occasions, filling in on Jim's breaks. As many as two or three people (besides my wife) came to know me through my performances. When I filled in for pay a few times, I thought I really had it made and I was even offered the job when Jim finally did quit, but I declined on the grounds that I didn't have the time to learn new songs and practice.

But you can see what I did. I established myself even more strongly as a Gay Nineties person. I was a regular. I knew the people and vice-versa. They came to expect me to be around. For those of you who can't imagine the stakes played for that kind of notoriety, just go to your favorite bar and try to borrow some cash on the cuff, or lay a pretty heavy tab on the bartender, or lay some IOU's on the guys you gamble with. Just try it. Note the I-see-a-stranger-look in the bartender's eyes when you ask for a loan. I mean it takes time to establish that kind of credibility.

So now what happens? The Gay Nineties moves, that's what happens. I mean the name's the same and all that, and in fact the plank and backbar are the same, but West, Inc., moved the Nineties out of the alley downtown lock, stock, and beer barrel, and moved it out onto the strip of macadam called Ninety-Three. I always thought there was a song or a joke there, but could never figure out a good one. You know, moving the Nineties to Ninety-Three. ("A Shanty in Old Shanty Town"?)
No more could you find a good parking place downtown and hit the old bars. Jake's old alley was priceless, just as it was when it had become the Gay Nineties. Out the back door of the Flame, in the alley door of the Nineties, out again to enter the back door of the Top Hat, out its front door to the Stockman's, over to the Havana, and do it all over again. You can still do that, you say, you can still do that and more, excluding the Nineties? Bullshit! The drinking and gambling are not the same. The games are the same, yes, and the booze is the same, but the people are not the same. People are what make things happen. Things change because people change. They just ain't the same, they've passed on, died, found new hangouts, emptied their glasses elsewhere. Left.

So what did I do? I moved to the strip with the Gay Nineties. And it wasn't bad for starters. I was closer to home and I didn't have to fight traffic and crowds if I didn't want to. Only I did want to. I haunted the old places, and still do when I'm of a mind to, only I have now become accustomed to the new Gay Nineties location. AND I HATE IT! I can hardly stand it. I want the old things back. I want to see Jake alive again, I want to see slinky Joe to get another free shot of dingleberry brandy, I want to see the Ladies-In-Lace again, I want to hear Jim tell jokes at Nat King Cole's expense. But it ain't gonna happen. They've gone.
They weren't gone for a time after the move to the strip. They were all there for awhile and I even sang occasionally in drunken buffoonery, crying inwardly for the cheap thrill of having fifty people clap and yell for more. But just as I ran out of old Elvis songs, the cronies ran out on me. Jim left. He's now a doctor of psychology (big D, big P?) at Johns Hopkins. The Ladies-In-Lace are gone. One remarried. One I saw in the airport a year ago, wishing we had time for a chat, but I was meeting my incoming wife and daughter and had three other rug-rats on my arm. Even the customers are different now.

I still go there and lose my money playing cribbage or guts (a bastard version of poker), and I still get drunk as sin there, and I still think of Jake's swinging doors (Is there a message there?), and I am still known as a regular. But there's a difference, as I pointed out, with the people. And how they treat me and how I treat them. I want to tell you about some of that. I want you to meet a couple of them. You see, they don't have an investment in the place, and I'm slowly realizing that I don't, either. Not anymore.

The thing is, even though they're what I call new regulars, none of them realize I've got them pre-empted in tenure, for what it's worth, and we all have many of the same things in common.

Meet Pat Wagner. He's okay. We talk a lot but mostly about the way things are and not how they were.
"What I oughta do is marry this cunt I know in Kalispell," Pat told me. He was lamenting the loss of a pretty good-looking blonde who had walked out on him a few days before. He couldn't understand why. He had a job selling cars for Wes Sprunk, made good dough, was relatively handsome, and was, as I said when I introduced him, a pretty good head. I like him and I listened, interested in his mood. You don't see many thirty-five year old guys with his qualifications mooning in bars over spilt blondes. Pat was trying to come to terms with himself after his loss. It was strange because he had a pretty good reputation for making out. Sitting in the red glow of Gay Nineties lights, Pat's normal barroom pallor intensified, maybe from real anguish over losing what he said was a good woman.

I wondered who this one was from Kalispell out loud, dutifully, but not without interest. After all, if this man was a success with the ladies, I should take note.

"She's a young widow, rich, with lots of dough," he answered, unaware of the duality of his statement, "and I mean lots. Her old man died a couple of years ago and left her a pile." I looked Pat's clothes over, as I often did, being that he was a with-it character in terms of his apparel. Car salesmen tend to look like insurance salesmen if they're not careful, and Pat is careful. He wears things like patent leather shoes, turtle necks, with-it jackets to match his trousers, patent leather belts, and that sort of stuff. Everybody's Playboy image, and I say that without
meaning disparagement. He's not your usual necktie-and-
she's-a-real-beauty-kind of car salesman.

I asked him why he would want to get married again, knowing he had been married once before.

"Oh, Christ, no," he said, his words short and crisp, coming from between lips that never seemed to move except when he smiled or laughed.

I asked why he didn't just live with the girl in Kalispell.

"I don't know. Can't stay with one woman, I guess. I just fuck up a lot and lose 'em for some reason," he said, unable to define his problem.

We were playing cribbage while we conversed and we were interrupted by Pete Schutte, a crazy little man who liked to say and do shocking things in the bar to get attention for himself, and it was usually in fun. Three women sat at the other end of the bar and I was sure he'd pull one of his nutty stunts to get their attention, but it didn't develop that way at all.

Pete was juiced and his short, husky body had endless reserves of energy.

"Hi, muthafuckers," Pete greeted us. He ordered a drink to match the kind we were having, which threw the pretty, but dumb, bartendress into a little spin of panic because Pat and I were drinking different kinds of drinks.

"Come on, Pete, what're you having?" she asked, confused and irritated. She said it in a no-nonsense way.
"I told ya, goddamit! Give me what they're having and give them one, too," Pete said.

I played my cards and watched Debbie, the bartendress, huff off to the mixing station. She was an auburn-haired girl, tall and pretty, hair hanging to her waist. She wore white denim pantsuits better than most, and it covered up her big tits only a little. Debbie had just returned from a trip to Reno with Vic Pelde, the last manager of the Gay Nineties (They're turning out a lot of 'em these days). I suspected she had a tit-job done when she was down there, but she said she and Vic had been married on the trip. It was bullshit, but I swallowed it for a few days. She returned from mixing the drinks just when Pat was calling me a cocksucker for thirty-oneing him during the pegging part of the game. She put two drinks in front of Pete and one each in front of Pat and me. Pete just stared at his drinks, ignored our thanks just as Debbie had ignored Pat's "cocksucker". Then it came.

"WHAT THE FUCK IS THIS?" Pete couldn't figure out why he had two drinks.

"Well, you said to give you what they were drinking," Debbie said, her little-girl's voice lacking only an accompanying foot-stomp.

"Well, Jesus Christ, I'm not paying for two goddam drinks at once," Pete informed her self-righteously.

"Well, kiss my ass, Schutte, I don't care what you do," she retorted, huffing off again to talk with the three,
I guess, hairdressers at the other end.

"I'd kiss her ass any day for a free drink," Pete said to Pat and me. "What are you playin', cribbage?"

"No, asshole, we're giving handjobs," one of us said, I forget which one. Must have been Pat.

We were interrupted by Pete's wife - don't know her name. She was pregnant. Pete gave her one of his freebie drinks so he wouldn't have to buy her one. "Hey, honey, tell these guys that joke," Pete urged his wife. "Go on, tell it."

"Well," she began hesitantly, "this joke has one of those bad words in it that begins with an F and ends with a K and I don't want to say that part of the joke."

Pat and I both assured her we would get the message when she eliminated that part of the joke.

She continued. "Well, you see, there was these two cocksuckers . . ."

Pete cackled and laughed like he'd never heard his wife tell the story before. Pat and I laughed, slightly embarrassed by being taken in with the set-up, and a slight bit of our Puritan ethic coming to the fore. Pete tried to explain the joke to us when he felt we didn't properly appreciate it.

"You see, there were these two cacksuckers," he said, using an A, like in cackle.

"Yeah, we get the joke, Pete," Pat assured him.
"Hey, Debbie, wanna hear a good joke?" Pete yelled to the other end of the bar. Debbie just glared back at him when she heard her name and looked like she didn't want to hear a good joke.

But Pete wasn't finished. "Know what just happened to me?" he asked all of us, including his wife. "I just asked some chick to fuck and know what she said? She said, 'No'. How about that? How could she refuse?" Cackle, cackle, cackle. Pete has a strange laugh.

"How could she have refused you?" Pat's starting-to-be-whiskey voice asked.

"I don't know," Pete replied, hopping from one foot to the other in his energetic way. "Maybe I shudda just asked her for a handjob." Cackle, cackle, cackle.

I looked at Pete's wife and she seemed to be enjoying the stuff. You could tell it was all a put-on on Pete's part, but I wondered if she wasn't bothered. I didn't ask because it was none of my business. Anyway, I remember she didn't mind Pete streaking in the Nineties on St. Patrick's Day - twice!

Larry Miller, the loudest conversationalist in the world, joined us. I noticed, for no reason in particular, that every day is beginning to seem like all the others. The curved end of the bar was becoming a popular corner. I wondered how many times I had sat at the same spot, new and old Gay Nineties, not counting Jake's. I let the memory die
before saying anything which might indicate to these new regulars that I had longevity, but then I let that die, too. Besides, when Miller begins talking to you, that's all you can hear, much less think. He is a stubby guy, too, husky, with a wide, pleasant face, and when he talks to you, he comes up to your ear and shouts - LOUD.

"LET'S PLAY SOME GUTS."

I flinched from the impact on my eardrums and told Miller he didn't have to shout at me so goddam close, I could hear him. Then I told him to wait until the game was over. Both Pat and I like to play guts, and so does Pete. A four-man game wouldn't be that bad. Besides, Miller is a pigeon, an easy mark.

We finished our crib game quickly because both of us were eager to accommodate Miller. Schutte decided he would play, too, but as it turned out, the game didn't last very long. Both Pete and Miller lost a few bucks and decided their luck wasn't with them today and Pat and I weren't going to butt heads. The game was over as quickly as it had begun.

"THAT'S RIGHT! I OWE YOU NINE-SIXTY FROM BEFORE, DON'T I?"

I recoiled from the decible increase, thought for a minute, pulled my markers from my wallet, and told Miller he didn't owe me anything. He mulled that over momentarily, then decided I was right.
YOU'RE RIGHT! I THINK I REMEMBER GIVING IT TO YOU A FEW DAYS AGO."

I ordered a round for all of us, including only the four players (Pete's wife had gone) because other guys were banding around the corner, easing the loser's pain for those who were in that category. I didn't want to buy for all of them.

I drifted to the can through swinging doors, (not the originals, I don't think) and let the few minutes of reprieve from Miller's yelling overcome me in the sanctity of the latrine, that still most private of all places. When I came out, the scenery had changed again, like a red-tinged cameleon; more people had arrived.

I've got to tell you about one of them. For reasons which will become obvious, I won't tell you his name. Actually, I'm not so sure I shouldn't since this story starts with him telling me something without restrictions in a conversation several days ago, but what the hell. When I came out of the can, he asked me not to use his name. It's humorous because he told me the story so I could write about it and he was more than happy to be used as a figure in the story-telling. I'm beginning to understand the difficulties in this kind of reportage. Anyway, it doesn't make any difference if you know who he is or not, so I'll just call him Kwaj.
One day while I was idly contemplating what Roy Rogers was doing these days, breaking my reverie only occasionally to catch a glimpse of Debbie's legs, Kwaj came in and sat beside me.

"Sonny, you remember that dude I was in here with the other day, the guy with the denim jacket and had the patches all over it?" Kwaj asked me.

I told him I didn't but he refreshed my memory with a description of a card game that night, a fact which will, even if all games tend to blend, stir my memory faster, and I finally came to remember.

"Well, that son-of-a-bitch used to be my friend. I need some advice. I respect your honesty. Tell me what the hell you'd do."

I asked him about what.

"Well, on that day, I put the finger on about ten people without realizing it. That guy used to be a friend of mine and later, after I spent time with him getting some leads for him to make a buy, he tells me he's a narc." Kwaj had a worried look on his face and I knew he wasn't feeding me bullshit because he doesn't usually worry.

"I used to know him as well as I know you and I thought he was an okay guy but the son-of-a-bitch turns into a fuckin' narc, man. And he used me, Sonny, to get names of people who might lead him to some dope. Shit, I gave him at least ten names of people, none of them pushers, or anything like that, but what the fuck am I gonna do? I even gave him
twenty bucks to get me some stuff once, long time ago. What the fuck am I gonna do?"

This was a little spooky. Kwaj told me some of the names of the people he had implicated and then he asked me again for my advice. My advice was uncomplicated. I told him to leave town.

"How the fuck can I leave town? What the fuck do you mean?" he asked me, angry now that I wasn't sympathizing with him. His tone of voice had become unfriendly and defensive. What more did he want from me? I could give a shit less, I told him. It was his problem, not mine. The conversation ended soon after that.

Now that I was walking out of the can, there Kwaj was again, sitting with the guys I had left a few minutes before. I walked over to my stool, pulled some pink paper from a notebook I borrowed from the barmaid, and made some notes. A new game was in progress, a poker game this time, and some of the guys wondered aloud what I was doing. I told one of them who was particularly obnoxious that he could read my notes if he wanted to but that they were none of his fucking business. He kept playing cards.

The guy with the narc story sat next to me. "Sonny, I know what the fuck you're doin'. I'm gonna put on my best side."

I looked at him, smiled, and said you know me. He wore a paisley red and white nylon shirt, had his naturally...
curly hair cut shorter, and since I was now in the business of recording such trivia, I noted that he was slim and handsome, too. I asked him how things were going and he asked me what I was doing. I could see I was getting nowhere. I told him I was doing some character sketches of people who hung around the Nineties (as if he didn't know).

Meanwhile, a gal with uncombed hair entered and pinched the guy's back real friendly like. He greeted her and gave her his stool, as the bar was overcrowded. The guy ignored me for the broad for awhile, bought her a Seven-Up, then left her there with me. I noticed he joined some good-looking girls at the other end. I ignored the one next to me and began watching the poker game. She kept trying to talk to me. I made notes once in awhile. She leaned on my arm. The writer's magic was working. I watched the game. She told me she would float if she had any more Seven-Up. I looked at her empty glass and decided not to buy anyone a Seven-Up. I watched the game. The girl told me where she lived, across the parking lot in a motel, and she had to get home. I told her goodbye. I watched the game some more. The girl left. I relaxed.

The guy with the narc story came back. "Don't judge her by her clothes," he told me without reason.

I asked what he meant.

"Well, she can't help what she is," he said. "Her clothes might be Salvation Army, like mine, but she's tryin'. She's tryin'."
I have mentioned Kwaj's clothes to you, and I might note, they hardly looked "Salvation Army". I told him I didn't care what kind of clothes anybody wore, and I concluded that he must have been watching her try to put the arm on me and saw that I had ignored her. I guessed that's what had bothered him. I asked him what was the problem.

"I'm very defensive at times," he told me, "but I'm me. No one can say it but old Kwaj. If nobody don't like me ain't nobody can like it but me. But I'm me," he summed up, which didn't tell me much.

I thought that one over and still couldn't come to a conclusion as to the point, so I asked him about the girl who had just left.

"She wears Salvation Army clothes," he repeated. "She needs a man. She needs to hustle a guy. But not me," he told me, and I wondered if he put her on to me for some reason. He continued. "... staying clean for a gal somewhere else. It's called unloading your nuts, whatever you call it. Pay the price for society, whatever you want to call it. It ain't worth it."

I thought I had missed something during my note taking and I decided that what I had written came straight out. I didn't know what it meant, exactly, but I guessed he was talking about people like the girl being in "dire straights".

I asked him how that shit with the narc went.

"I don't want you using names," he told me, "but (narc) was a drinking buddy of mine for two and a
half years. He caused old Kwaj to rat on some people. He was the first guy I played guitar with. And I was wrecked with him. Just flat stoned. When you're stoned just do your own thing. Then he's gone eight, ten months. Then he shows, tells me to meet him at the Black Angus for beer. I give him twenty bucks for a lid earlier but when I get to the Angus it's closed."

He's silent for a full minute. I don't know if he paused to give me time to catch up on my notes or if he's contemplating something else. I ordered us two more drinks.

"So I leave a note on the door of the Angus, that I'm at the Trail's End. He doesn't show. Anyway, I figure I'm out twenty bucks but he shows up a couple of days later, he's from Lewistown now, he tells me, and he's my buddy and wants to pick up a load. He's buying me beer 'cause I'm flat busted now.

"I introduce him to everybody. He's got four hundred dollars and he wants to make a buy and take it to Lewistown. He's got kids and a family. I don't know if it's true. I know he was married but he says he's divorcing his old lady. So anyway, for a few days I set him up with people. I know this broad. He needs the shit, going down the road. He meets with a guy. He's a tiny guy and he's got the load. Seven grams of hash. Busts him downtown."

I stop taking notes for a few minutes. I've got writer's cramp. Kwaj and I swallow some more booze. Wish he would keep his story in order.
He goes on. "Now I'm from East St. Louis. Everybody's running outside. (narc) got eight hundred dollars (I note the disparity between four hundred and eight hundred, but I don't say anything since I'm having enough trouble with his disjointed speech patterns). This guy goes in front with the money and out the back at Eddie's. Now (narc) got a gun. 'Nobody's gonna pop me off anymore,' he says to me. I asked him, 'Are you out of your fuckin' mind?' and he says back to me, 'I'm a narc'. Just like that. The first I knew. Man, was I set up. Here I give him ten names."

We sip more booze and take another short break. He begins again.

"So I tell him, 'If you don't fuckin' believe in me, fuck it, I got a lot of new friends.' I went back to everybody and gave them (narc)'s name, that he was a narc. He told me there were seventeen narcs in town. Right now. Straight out of meatball's mouth. People in town don't even want to talk to me right now. It's a good way to find out who your friends are. Being a buddy, tryin' to help him out. Cheapest thing in the world to do to a friend. Which I don't guess I was a friend. Now for twenty dollars they got me nailed for settin' the thing up. And I had to go around explainin' to everybody. Don't make sense. That's like me turnin' out to be a narc."

We pause again. My arm is hurtin' like hell, but I shake it off. I drink some more, then I notice for the first
time in thirty minutes that the poker game has progressed
to bigger stakes. I don't like the way the stranger in the
black buttoned-up shirt and dark sport coat is playing. I
watch him make the wrong change for Pat but I don't say any­
thing because I'm not in the game. The stranger has every­
body buffaloed. I pick up my pen to indicate I'm ready to
start writing again and Kwaj notices the cue.

"But _____ (the arrested person) is not a pusher,"
Kwaj continues. "He helped me find the stuff for my so­
called friend. He's on bail now. But no way he's a pusher.
It's nobody's business. Nobody's goddam business. They're
afraid everybody's selling to high school but nobody's sel­
ling to high school kids." Which I note as nonsense.

Kwaj tells me again that he wants no names used. I
tell him I don't have to write names. I could give a shit
less. He's satisfied. We drink some more. Pat, who's been
playing cards against the black-clad stranger, says to me in
a jovial manner, "I gotta see what you're writing about me." I
tell him no sweat.

My hard-luck friend says for no apparent reason, "The
Northwest ain't cherry." I think some more and drink some
more. I think how strange it is to have a pen and paper out
in a place like this and how complicated things become. It's
like lining people up for a snapshot. They all start pos­
ing. I realize I've done the same kind of thing many times
in similar situations. No one is immune from wanting fame,
even a little of it. ("Damn rights I know Elvis' songs.")
Kwaj said, "You just got a dishrag to put in your mouth, you know, shut you up." I see he's still thinking about the potential charges against him for his involvement, maybe for an attempted twenty dollar buy from his narc friend.

"You got 'em all over," he said. "Both sides now." ("Ice cream castles in the air.") "Look at Patty Hearst. Is she in on it or not? Who the fuck knows? Don't know what to believe any more. Just hope the man doesn't put you in jail. Lotta good happening, too. Lotta good guys, too. Like you. I asked your opinion once and you told me true. I respect that. You're honest. But who the fuck do you trust?" ("Tell me, Lord.")

The obnoxious card player who wondered earlier what I was writing asked if he could read my notes. I figured he was paranoid about gambling and thought I was writing some bad shit. I wondered if he didn't realize that gambling was legal now (although not at this normal, unlicensed game) but I also asked myself if a gambling law can reduce paranoia about getting caught gambling in bars. I handed him my notes, knowing he would be unable to decipher my high-speed printing. I'm right. He hands them back with a nervous laugh after scanning a couple of pages. He looks me in the eye nervously, like he doesn't quite believe me.

Pat quit the game and walks over to me. "I figure I'm ahead," he said. "Got what I started with and I figure that puts me ahead. I drank, had fun, and I'm through."
He asks me to join him at a table and I in turn ask Kwaj to join us. He declines, saying he has to go home. I sit at the first table with Pat, then another guy joins us. I listen to them discuss the game they played with the stranger and I tell them he was cheating. They said they thought they detected him coming up with flushes too frequently. Pat wants to know what I'm writing. I tell him about the sketches. He tells me about some of the strange things he wants to write about, like the chick who came up to him at the juke-box and told him she didn't want him taking advantage of her because she heard he was a hustler. He's never seen the girl before. ("I don't like spiders and snakes.")

I decide it's time to go home. The fun of the place has ended for the night. I leave and while I'm getting into my car, I see Kwaj getting into his. I wave but he pretends he doesn't see me. I watch him in my rear-view mirror before I cross the highway and I see he is driving one hundred yards to the 93 Motel of the Salvation Army-clad girl. I wonder if he decided not to "stay clean for a gal somewhere."

Driving home I decide I have enough stuff to write a short piece about the flavor of the Gay Nineties. I wonder how much I'll have to bullshit to make it look good and I decide I don't have to bullshit at all. I also decide to organize my notes when I get home, late as it is.

When the notes are organized, I think some last thoughts about Jake's, the simplicity of the old fun. If you screwed up, you got thrown out on your ass, no questions asked.