In the big war | A novel

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The University of Montana

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In The Big War
A Novel
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Prologue

The missing month, part one:

Long Range Patrol

The Huey helicopter chops its way down through the still, evening air. The rice paddy grows. The skids stop a foot above the water. Thompson jumps and four more men follow him. The chopper roars as it climbs. The men bend low and run to the edge of the jungle a hundred feet away. They rest as the sounds of the helicopter fade away toward the blue green mountains to the east.

"The place we're supposed to go is about eight klicks from here." Thompson says quietly. "If we're going to be there before dark, we'd better get humping. I'll take point. Matthews, take the rear."

He doesn't see Matthews nod, he just turns and heads into the jungle, up the narrow trail into the hills.

Thompson, alert, eyes nervous, searching. Searching the trail for booby traps. Searching the trees. Searching ahead and to the sides. Thompson's feet
carefully picking their way, avoiding sticks which might break. Four men behind him searching, stepping carefully. Silent except for the occasional clink and clunk of a pack. Matthews watching the rear, head pivoting, watching the sides. Watching.

The red clay trail winds through the jungle, up into the foothills, past huge trees with thorns three inches long. Mosquitoes feast on Thompson's arms and face. He ignores them. Searches the jungle. Wipes sweat off his face. Eyes burn.

Then, in the trail. Five N.V.A. They shout, dive for the cover of the jungle. Shooting. A grenade loops through the air. Explodes. Thompson rolls through the thick ferns. Rolls. Two men behind him go down screaming. Matthews and Blake dive off the trail together both pouring M-16 fire at the enemy. One of the N.V.A. raises. Falls. Another raises, hurls a grenade which explodes between Blake and Matthews.

Thompson raises, fires two rounds and drops back down, M-16 jammed. He rolls. Rolls. The N.V.A. hurls another grenade. Thompson rolls, crawls. "Fucking M-16." He thinks. "There must be something wrong with it. Why the fuck did they give it to me?"

The grenade explodes. Half stunned, Thompson pulls a grenade from his belt, pulls the pin, throws it. Pulls another, pulls the pin and throws it. Then the last
one flies through the air.

Thompson crawls. Pushes through the jungle. Slaps brush aside with his rifle. Thorns tear at his face and arms, clutch his clothes. Sweat burns.

The N.V.A. continue to throw grenades and shoot as Thompson stumbles into a small creek. He turns and wildly begins running downstream back toward the rice paddy, away from the shooting. Ankle deep water splashes. Air tears his lungs. A crying, gasping whine is ripped from his lungs at every breath. He runs. Runs.

A small, stiff-haired pig splashes, squealing, out of the stream and crashes up a game trail. Thompson follows it as hard as he can run.


The firing has stopped. Thompson's breathing slows. From the trail behind him come two more shots. "Finishing off shots." He thinks calmly.

He lurches to his feet and staggers up the trail. Away from the creek, up into the hills. More careful now. The N.V.A. will be looking for him, but first they will gather all the equipment and hide it. He's got a few minutes. He steps carefully on the edges of the trail, not in the middle.

The parrots, disturbed by the crashing pig are settling back down. He follows the trail until a wider
trail crosses it, then he backs up stepping only in his footprints, back, back for a hundred yards. He pauses. Jumps sidewise six feet into the jungle, a trick he learned tracking a white-tail buck in the snow once.

Carefully through the jungle toward the west, toward Laos rather than the east and friendly forces. Always to the west toward the enemy. He must throw them off. There will be more of them close. How many? A company? A batallion? West for ten or fifteen klicks, then north for another twenty or thirty before he can head the sixty kilometers back to friendly forces. How long? It doesn't matter. Must be careful. Not hurry.


Three canteens of water and plenty of creeks. He checks his pocket and feels the bottle of iodine tablets. Full. Good. Got to remember to use 'em. Two in each canteenful. Can't afford dysentery. He checks the other pocket and feels the malaria pills.

He wants to go back to the trail and see what happened, but knows he doesn't dare. Keep calm and keep moving.

After dark, the coughing growl of a big cat, a leopard or a tiger, brings him to a halt. He's safe for now from the enemy, but how about the jungle? The cats?
The snakes? The damned spiders? He shudders. Tears swell up behind his eyes and trickle down his cheeks.

He moves to a huge tree, takes his pack off, sits down and leans back. His stomach feels empty, but he forces himself to wait.

The parrots have quieted down and the only noise is the humming of the mosquitoes and the occasional call of a monkey.

Just after midnight a tiger passes downwind of Thompson. It stops and faces him. Its upper lip curls in a silent snarl. It moves on soundlessly, soft pads barely denting the rotting, wet leaves.

At two a.m. Thompson jerks awake. He shivers. Holds his breath. Nothing. No sound except for the mosquitoes and the chuck-a-chuck sound of a frog or lizard and the continual monotonous sound of the dripping rain. He leans back against the tree and closes his eyes.

A monkey chattering wakes him at the first hint of daylight. He sits up, alert. Checks the safety on his M-16. Curses when he remembers that he must clean it. Quickly he tears the rifle down and scrubs the bolt with a toothbrush he takes from his pack. He pulls a lightly oiled cloth from a sealed plastic bag and goes over each part. He automatically puts the rifle back together, then stands and moves away from his pack, urinates against a tree and moves back.
He opens a can of meatballs and beans and eats them with the plastic spoon. They leave a greasy feeling in his mouth. He looks at the can of pears, starts to put them back then says, "Fuck it."

He opens the can of pears and eats them, noisily slurping the juice from the can when he is done. He digs a hole and burys the cans then carefully replaces the leaves and scatters the excess mud. The smoke from his cigarette drifts up into the roof of leaves above him and disappears. He sits, thinking of what is ahead of him and the sick feeling of the day before comes back. The panic returns as do the tears. "Fuck it. I can't think about it. I just gotta take it as comes or I'll go fucking crazy."

He flicks the coal from the end of the Camel and his thumbnail slices the paper. He scatters the tobacco and wads the paper into a tight ball and flicks it away, then he gets up and starts heading west, up the mountain, through the jungle. The monkeys mark his passing by their silence.

Carefully, slowly. Take three steps and stop and watch. Listen. Three more steps and stop. Quietly move branches aside and let them fall back into place and all the time the rain falls. Warm, soupy-feeling rain dripping from the trees, and all the time, the intruding thoughts, "I should have gone back. I should have stayed. Maybe I could have done something. Like die? Maybe. Maybe that
would be better. How long can one man survive in this fucking place? One day. I can survive today if I'm careful." Three steps and pause, then three more steps and at ten o'clock he comes to a major trail, six feet wide heading north and south. Many feet, booted and bare have passed back and forth. Thompson backs away, squats down and looks at the map. This must be the trail they were to find. He and Matthews and Blake....can't think about that.

He moves back to the trail. Looks both ways. Listens. He jumps across the trail and quickly disappears into the jungle on the other side. He moves a hundred yards farther, then removes his pack and with his machette chops out an area large enough to sit comfortably in. He sits down and leans back against his pack. He pulls a cigarette from the package, but changes his mind because the trail is so near. He pulls a plastic bag from one of the side pouches in his pack and touches each of the four packages of Camels, then puts it back. He checks the bottle with the iodine pills, checks his salt tablets and his malaria pills.

He groans as he gets to his feet. He shoulders his pack and shrugs it into place. He grabs his M-16 and starts creeping through the jungle, up into the mountains and to the west. Carefully, three steps and stop, three more and stop. Mop the sweat from his eyes. Stop to piss and move on again. Stop every mile or so to take a drink.
At three o'clock he thinks, "Damnit. I've got to shit. I hate shitting." He looks around. Spots a fallen tree which is just about the right height. Moves to it and chops a hole in the saturated ground with his entrenching tool. He pulls his wet pants down and leans against the tree. When he is done he pulls his pants back up and covers the hole, patting the ground down and scattering the mud into the jungle. "Enough ass wipe for two more days, then it's the damned leaves. I hate wiping my ass on leaves."

He continues moving until he comes to a small stream, then stops and unslings his pack. He wipes the sweat from his eyes, leans his rifle against a tree, then sits down and leans back. He digs in his pack and comes out with a small brown can of white bread. He dips again and comes up with an even smaller can of peanut butter. He opens both cans, swallows two salt tablets and a big orange malaria pill and washes them down with water from the canteen, then begins eating the bread and peanut butter. The parrots and monkeys begin their calling. Thompson lights a cigarette. Sighs loudly. Two tears squeeze from his eyes. He fights it, swallows hard, but two more come. He closes his eyes and more tears dribble down his cheeks. It's too hot. A hundred and twenty degrees. The mosquitoes suck his blood. The rain drips. The few patches of sky which show through the leaves are grey and black. If it would just stop raining!
He dozes. Starts. Dozes again.

He sits up. Looks around. An hour's gone by. It seems darker. He gets up, shoulders his pack, shrugs it into place and begins moving. Half a mile later, the rain becomes a downpour. Its violence nearly takes his breath. He squats, leans his pack against a tree and hunches his shoulders against the rain. There's no wind and no lightning. Just rain. Not individual drops of rain, but a waterfall of it. Thompson begins shivering.

He curses the rain. Prays for it to stop. Then he grins. No mosquitoes. They're gone. For the first time in over a month he isn't being eaten.

The rain slows. Almost stops. The jungle, stunned by the violence, begins to come to life. The mosquitoes crawl from under the leaves where they had taken refuge and begin seeking Thompson once again. A parrot screeches. A monkey's chee-chee-chee answers it.

The sun comes out. The ground and the trees and Thompson's uniform begin steaming. Thompson stands and looks around him. All the leaves hang limply as if they have been chastised. He shoulders his pack and begins once again moving westward through the wet jungle.

At noon of the fifth day Thompson feels he has gone far enough west. The time has come to turn north, back toward the original trail, the one which led them into
the ambush. His guts tighten up in fear. The east-west trail is one of the main arteries used by the N.V.A. to bring equipment in to South Vietnam. They had been warned that they would see plenty of activity on the trail. Now he must go back to it. Cross it. He curses the government, the Army, the N.V.A. and God. If the five soldiers in the ambush were part of a battalion, he knows he'll never get through. If they're only a company, he might have a chance. If he can only get past the trail. According to the map the land to the north of the trail opens up a little. There are valleys and rivers and farms. This means food. Bananas and pineapples maybe. And rice.

It also means people. He'll have to be more careful. Hole up during the middle part of the day. Move in the early morning and late evening. But that's in two or three days. For now, one thing at a time. For now he must get back to the trail and cross it.

He buries his c-ration can and begins his cautious movement north, toward the trail, toward the N.V.A.

When there's about an hour of daylight left, Thompson stops for the night. He chops a small clearing and piles the six-foot-long fern leaves up to use as a bed. He eats a can of scrambled eggs and lies back, using his helmet as a pillow to keep his head off the wet ground. The jungle noises suddenly stop. He holds his breath. Voices. Vietnamese voices moving through the jungle,
getting closer. Closer. The voices stop not ten feet from him. They seem to be having an argument, but then they start laughing.

A bamboo pit viper disturbed by the Vietnamese crawls toward Thompson. He wants to scream. It is bright green and about twenty inches long. He remembers what Mad Dog said about pit vipers. "If one bites you, lie down so you can die in comfort, because you're going to die."

The green snake slowly crawls up his legs. It stops between his knees and coils up. It looks into Thompson's eyes. Looks.

The Vietnamese voices begin moving to the east. Away from Thompson.

The snake stares at him. Stares. Thompson wants to cry.

His rectum begins to itch unbearably. He feels as if he has swimming suit itch all over. He can't stand it.

The snake crawls up to his belt. He feels his testicles crawl up inside him. Hopes the snake doesn't feel it. His rectum tightens up. The snake pauses. Raises the front half of its body. Stares at Thompson's eyes. Then it turns around. Crawls down across his feet and away into the jungle.

Thompson vomits. Tears stream down his face. He vomits again. He looks at the steaming mound of scrambled eggs. He gags. He crawls away from the vomit and kneels.
Shudders. He grabs his rifle and creeps toward where the voices had been.

There, not more than ten feet from his pack is the trail. Booted footprints tell him that the voices belonged to the N.V.A.

He returns to his pack, swings it onto his shoulders and returns to the trail. He pauses. Listens. Then moves across the trail careful to step only on the rocks. On the far side of the trail is a fallen tree and Thompson steps up on it and follows it away from the trail. He moves into the jungle careful to not tear any leaves or break branches. He keeps moving slowly for half an hour until he figures he is three hundred paces from the trail, then he strikes out at as fast a pace as he can manage through the thick rain forest, stopping only once to piss and once more to wipe out a spider web six feet in diameter and kill the six inch, lime green spider.

When it's too dark to continue, Thompson settles down for the night.
Prologue
The Missing Month part two:
Thrun

Thompson leans against his pack thinking about how far he's come and how far he has to go. He remembers the snake. The N.V.A. He shudders. The tears of self pity once again form and he fights them back. The argument begins. "I'm hungry."

"So what. You've had today's rations."

"If I don't eat, I'll die."

"Bullshit. If you do eat, you'll die. You've got to save it for later."

"There may not be any later. Shit. I could have died today."

"True."

"Maybe just the can of peaches?"

The empty peach can lies in the mud alongside the beans and franks and the small cheese tin and the pear can and Thompson's hand is going back into the pack for
more when he says aloud, "No. Goddamnit. Knock it off. You damned fool. Two- and- a- half days rations. Jesus Christ, what'd you do?"

The tears start again and this time he does nothing to stop them.

At two am. seven small, wire-haired wild pigs come rooting among the empty cans and Thompson's thumb checks the safety on the M-16 even though he doesn't wake. The movement startles the pigs and they scurry off. Once later in the night Thompson's hand twitches as a larger version of the six inch, green spider he killed earlier in the day crawls across his lap, across his bare arm and away into the jungle.

"Chee-chee-chee."

Thompson jerks awake. The monkey is six feet from him. Its old man's face wrinkles and puckers as it studies him. It reaches for the bean can. Stops and studies Thompson.

He sits up cursing. The other cans are gone. The screaming monkey disappears into the jungle.

"Fuck. Stupid ass. Why didn't you bury 'em."

He sits, staring at nothing. His intestines feel as if they are gnawing each other. He reaches in the pack for the can of beef stew.

"No, Goddamnit. You've only got two days food left. Tonight. Eat it tonight."
He gets up and begins once more his cautious movement northward. One foot ahead of the other. Bend branches aside. Let them spring back. Watch for snakes. For spiders. Watch for ambush. North, up and over jungle tangled mountains, wade through muddy streams for three aching, leg-weary days. Three sweating days of rain and baking sun. Then on the fourth morning head back east, back across the border into Vietnam. Hunger gnawing. Gnawing.

And on the third day of the eastward leg Thompson stops. A pig squealing. He creeps ahead. Slowly. Slowly. A small, game trail leads downward. He moves carefully along it. At a bend in the trail he pauses. Listens. Then, ten feet ahead of him the pig once again squeals and struggles. Its hind foot caught in a snare. It's nearly dead. Thompson's hand clutches his machette. He steps forward, swings his machette high. Then stops. If he kills it, they'll know he's here. Whoever they are.

He backs away from the trail and squats behind a tree. He waits.

In the early evening he hears the swish-swish of clothing rubbing against leaves coming up the trail. A woman. Pretty and slim with long straight black hair down to her waist. Her eyes are black and even from the distance seem soft and warm. She looks at the pig. Talks softly to it, then raises the stout stick she is carrying.
There is a thud and the pig kicks hard for a few moments then is still.

The woman watches it. Pokes it with the stick, then unties the snare from the tree, wraps the wire around the stick and swings it to her shoulder. The eighty pound pig swings behind her as she walks down the trail.

Thompson longs to call out to her, but instead lets her get out of sight and starts following her. Down, the trail leads, and down. It crosses a stream, then follows along the far side of it. Down into a small valley, into a rice paddy. On the edge of the jungle, on the edge of the rice is a small, mud-walled house and two miles east, away on the far side of the rice paddies, a small village of ten or so houses.

A small, scrouffty-looking, shaggy-assed dog comes running to greet the woman. It runs around her, darting in at the pig, then back away. The woman pays it no attention. She lowers the pig to the ground. She unwires the back foot and wires the front feet together. She then slips the pole between the front feet and lifts the pole up across the low branches of two trees in the hard-packed yard. The dog sniffs the ground where the pig had lain and growls. The pole shifts slightly and the pig swings a little. The dog yips and runs about twenty feet away then turns around and growls at the pig.

Thompson, squatting in the edge of the jungle, sees
the woman come out of the house with a knife and a kettle of water. She crosses to the pig and sets the kettle down. She steps to the pig and with a flick of her wrist dumps its intestines out on the ground. She separates the liver and heart from the intestines and puts them in the kettle of water. She calls to the dog. It approaches the intestines carefully, shyly, and begins licking the blood from them. The woman starts skinning the front legs of the pig.

By dark the pig is skinned and carried inside. The dog has eaten his fill and abandons the gut pile to the mosquitoes and flies. He follows the woman to the house.

A flickering light shows through the lone window which faces the jungle. Smoke and a few sparks come from the chimney. Thompson creeps closer to the house. He pauses by a banana tree and checks the bananas, but they are green and hard. He moves on toward the window. Inside is a table with a lighted candle on it. The woman is standing by an open fireplace watching strips of the liver curl and sizzle on the iron rod suspended a foot and a half above the fire.

Thompson can smell the meat roasting. He hates liver. He always has. Ever since he heard his stepfather tell his mother that screwing her was like putting it into a bucket of warm liver. Thompson hates liver, but he knows that if he doesn't get some of it, he will die. Tears come
to his eyes as he watches her turn the rod so the meat will get evenly done.

Thompson checks the safety on his M-16, then steps around the corner of the house. He stands to let his eyes adjust to the darkness. He stares toward the village. Finally he steps through the open doorway and shuts the door behind him. The woman gasps and grabs the knife from the table. The dog snarls and rushes at Thompson. He kicks it back. The woman says something and the dog runs under the table to stand growling.

Thompson stands, his M-16 ready. He points at the liver and rubs his stomach and says, "Food? Eat?"

The woman relaxes a little. "You hongry?" she asks in English.

"Oh thank God, you speak English. Yes. I'm hungry. I'm lost. I got separated from my company. I've got to get back. If you'll help me, I'll give you anything I've got. My government will pay you. I'm sure. Please don't tell anyone I'm here. How about your husband? Your family? Where are they?"

"You hongry?" the woman asks again. Her eyes seem warm once again.

"Yes." Thompson laughs. "Yes, I'm hungry." He unslings his pack and sets it on the table.

The woman takes a cloth from the shelf on the wall alongside the bed. She wraps the cloth around her
hand and moves to the fire. She lifts the spit from its holders and carries it back to the table. She sets it down on the table and steps back. She motions toward the liver and says, "You hongry?" She smiles.

Thompson says, "Yeah, yeah. I'm hungry. I guess you don't speak English. That's all right though. It's ok."

The woman says something to him in Vietnamese, then calls the dog to the door and lets it out.

"Ok," The woman says, looking at Thompson's pack.

"Yeah. Whatever." Thompson says around mouthfuls of liver.

He looks around the one room house. There are no chairs. Only rice straw mats on the hard packed dirt floor. The bed is made of several of the mats piled on top of one another. There are two U.S. Government issue wool blankets folded neatly on one end of the mats.

Thompson turns back to the woman. "You hongry?" he asks, and offers her some of the liver.

She takes a piece of the liver and begins eating it.

"What's your name?" Thompson asks. "Name?" He points at his chest and says, "Tommy. Tommy."

She looks at him with frightened eyes. He smiles at her and repeats the gesture, saying, "Tommy.
Tommy."

The woman grins and taps his chest and says, "Tommytommy. Tommytommy."

She points at herself and says what sounds to Thompson to be something like, Trun or Thrun or Throon.

"Thrun." He repeats. "Thrun." They both smile.

Thrun wipes the spit with the cloth and returns it to its spot on the fireplace. She then goes to the pile of mats alongside the wall and digs beneath them and returns to Tommy with a picture. It is of a young Vietnamese man in the uniform of the ARVN. The Army of the Republic of Vietnam.

Thrun says, "Mort. Le mort."

"Mort?" Thompson asks.

"Mort. Died." She says and goes into a long sentence the only words of which he can understand being, "Number ten."

He doesn't know if this means that she considers it to be bad that her husband died or that he was a soldier and died. Then Thompson realizes why she lives in a house away from the village. The widow of someone who had served in the Army of South Vietnam would be a danger to the other people of the village. As much danger as he is to her by being with her.

"Shit." He says. "I'd better leave."

"Shit?" she says.
Thompson grins and says, "Yeah."

He steps to his pack and begins to swing it up on his shoulder.

Thrun shakes her head no. She takes his pack back off and sets it carefully in the same spot on the table. She goes to the door and slips the loop of rope which serves as a doornob around a peg which is set into the mud wall. She goes to the bed and spreads the mats out along the floor. A small green lizard runs from beneath one of the mats and climbs up her arm. She sets it on the wall and it climbs up to the shelf. Thrun moves to the table and picks up a scrap of liver and carries it to the lizard. She then comes back to the table and blows out the candle. She says something he can't understand and goes back to the bed. She spreads one blanket out on the mats, then the other. She folds about two feet of the top blanket back and points at the bed and at Thompson and at herself.

Thompson shrugs and goes to the bed. He takes off his boots and socks and crawls under the cover over next to the wall. Thrun says another long sentence while plucking at her clothes and Thompson figures that she wants him to get undressed, but he chooses to ignore her. Thrun shrugs and removes her clothes. She crawls in between the blankets.

Thompson awakens only twice during the night.
The first time he hears a shuffling noise outside. He falls back asleep when he realizes that it is the dog. The next time he awakens it is more difficult to fall back asleep. Thrun has snuggled against him. The warmth of her butt is thrust into his lap. He lies there aroused, half erect. Aching for her. Wanting her and feeling guilty for it. He knows that she has pushed against him in her sleep, that it was accidental, knows that he should move away from her, but he can't. He lies there aching and wanting her until she rolls over in her sleep.

At dawn Thrun sits up in bed. She touches Thompson's shoulder then gets up. Thompson watches her as she dresses. She is lovely. Small and slim. Her pointy breasts stand out as does her butt. She looks so incredibly firm. When she turns back to the bed, Thompson shuts his eyes. He wants her so much. There is a tight feeling in his scrotum and a heavy, tense feeling beneath his stomach.

He rolls over, off the mats and gets to his feet. As he is pulling his boots on, Thrun opens the door and the dog runs in snarling. Thrun silences it with one word. It wags its tail and approaches Thompson. He kneels and offers it the back of his hand to sniff. The dog pushes its way under his hand to have its ears scratched.

Thompson stands. Thrun is gone. He looks around. He says aloud, "Damn.......I wish there was a calendar. It
must be somewhere between the tenth and fifteenth of October. I guess."

He hears Thrun approaching the door. She comes back into the house with some dried branches which she puts in the fire place and lights with a C-ration match. Thompson grins. Every place you go these days, the Army has been there before you. I wish I could ask her what day it is. But shit, they probably don't even use calendars. At least not the same one.

Thrun puts some strips of pork on the spit then goes back outside. Thompson walks to his backpack and removes an unopened package of Camels. He moves to the fire and throws the celophane wrapper in and watches it curl up. He takes a stick from the fire and lights a cigarette. He looks up to see Thrun come in the door. She has two wooden boxes, one empty and the other filled with salt.

After they have eaten their breakfast Thrun begins cutting the pork in strips about an inch wide and an inch thick by six inches long. When she has several strips cut, she spreads a layer of salt on the bottom of the empty box. She then takes the strips of pork and lays them in the box being careful that there is room between all the strips. She then packs salt between and on top of all them. Thompson watches her for a minute, then takes the knife and begins cutting strips of meat from the
carcass of the pig. When all but about two pounds of the pork is cut and salted down Thrun stops Thompson. She goes outside and comes back with a lid for both boxes. She lays the lids in place and bends to pick up the box of pork. Thompson puts his hand on her shoulder and says, "No. Let me."

He picks the box up and waits for her direction. Thrun takes the box of salt and walks out of the house and around it to a lean-to in the back. It is small, about the size of a dog house and has a corrugated tin roof. Thrun opens the door and places the box of salt on the floor of the lean to. Thompson sets the pork alongside of the salt. Thrun takes three wire snares from the hut and wraps them around her waist, then shuts the door.

They go back to the house and Thrun offers Thompson the remainder of the breakfast pork. He's not really hungry, but it smells so good, he eats it anyway.

When he has finished Thrun begins gesturing and talking and pulling on his arm. He follows her out into the rain. She orders the dog to stay, then leads Thompson into the jungle and back up the trail he had followed her down the night before. When they have gone what Thompson figures to be two hundred yards Thrun cuts off the path and goes about a hundred more yards into the jungle where she starts cutting branches and leaves with her machete. She weaves the branches into a frame and laces the leaves over
the framework leaving the sides open. When she is satisfied with the hootch she gestures for him to follow her and she returns to the trail. Following game trails which twist and turn through the jungle, Thrun leads Thompson farther and farther from the rice paddies. Every half a mile or so she steps off the trail to check a snare, then returns and they set off again. At one place she pulls a wire from around her waist and sets a snare, low in the grass where the trail crosses a small, muddy stream.

About an hour after they set the snare Thrun pauses and puts her hand over her mouth and then over Thompson's. They listen. From high up in the trees comes the whistling call of a bird. Another answers it.

Thrun pulls a strip of bright yellow cloth a foot long and two inches wide from her pocket. She strips the leaves from a small sapling and ties the cloth to a bare branch. She then breaks a long, switch-like branch from the sapling and motions for Thompson to crouch beneath a low, leafy tree. Thrun squats beneath another tree which is a little closer to the cloth. She begins whistling at the birds. For perhaps half an hour she calls at them and they answer. Then a bright-green and yellow, heavy-billed bird comes spiraling down from above. It lands on a branch above the piece of cloth and screeches several times at it. Then it drops alongside the cloth, grabs it with its bill and begins fiercely struggling with it.
Thrun steps out from under her tree, swings the switch and the bird drops at her feet, its neck broken. Thrun drops the switch, picks the bird up and motions Thompson to follow her. As they move down the trail, she wraps the end of one of the snare wires around the bird's feet. It swings from her hip as she walks.

When the sun is almost overhead Thrun steps from the path and motions Thompson to follow her. They go back into the jungle and a minute later they arrive at the hootch they had built earlier. She points at the hut and at Thompson and pushes him toward it. Thompson crawls in out of the rain and watches her disappear among the tall ferns.

About an hour before dark she returns. As Thompson crawls out of the hootch, Thrun takes his arm and smiles at him. They move through the jungle and back out onto the dike of the rice paddy.

When they get back to the house, Thrun sets a pan full of boiled bird and rice on the table. She hands Thompson a small bowl and takes a bowl for herself. She dips the bowl into the pan and then starts eating the rice and bird with her fingers.

It is spicy, almost as hot as Mexican food, and the bird is a little tough, but Thompson takes seconds and then thirds. He then sits on the edge of the table and
lights a cigarette. Thrun smiles at him and takes his bowl, washes it and puts it on the shelf. She then begins sweeping the dirt floor with a broom which is no more than a stick with rice straw wired tightly around it.

The dog stays between Thompson's feet during this operation. Thompson has the impression that it has felt the business end of the broom before now. Thrun sweeps the crumbs out into the yard and orders the dog out. She closes the door and comes back to Thompson. She touches his hand and smiles. She puts a lid on the pan of left-over rice and puts the pan in a corner by the door. She then blows the candle out and moves to the bed. She spreads the mats out and covers them with the blankets. Then she undresses and crawls between the covers.

Thompson removes his boots and crawls over her next to the wall. Thrun snuggles next to him. He moves tight against the wall. She moves against him again. Her hands move to the back of his head and she pulls his face to her and kisses him. She guides his hand to her breast. He can feel the nipple harden and protrude between his fingers. Her hand moves to his crotch and fumbles with the buttons. Thompson groans and unbuckles his belt. He pulls his pants down over his feet. He throws them out of the bed. His underpants follow them and then his shirt.

Thrun's hand begins fondling his penis. He can feel it growing erect. She puts her head under the covers
and begins kissing him. His penis begins throbbing. Thrun comes back up for air and begins kissing him. She takes his hand and guides his fingers to her clitoris. She moans deep in her throat as he begins rubbing it. Then she is twitching and humping against his hand. She screams softly and climbs on top of him. As Thompson feels her warm, wet tightness surround his penis he prays, "Please don't let her know that its my first time. Please."

Thrun thrusts against him again and again and again and the unbearable tickling begins deep inside him and explodes out the end of his penis. Thrun collapses on him moaning. His arms go around her and he holds her saying over and over again, "I'm sorry, Thrun. I'm sorry. I tried to stop it. I tried."

Thrun only holds him tighter and whispers against his neck.

By midnight when Thrun falls asleep, they have made love two more times. Each time seems better than the other to Tommy. He lies there thinking that he'll really have something to tell Zaffke and Spock when he gets back.

At dawn Thrun is up. Once again Thompson watches her pull on her black pants and blouse. He lies in bed as she goes through her morning routine of building fire and fixing breakfast. She smiles at him occasionally as she moves about the house. When the pork is done, she carries it to the table and smiles shyly at Tommy.
He groans and stretches and gets out of bed. He dresses before moving to the table to eat breakfast.

After breakfast Thrun takes the pan with last night's rice in it and they go out into the rain, back to the hootch in the jungle. Thrun sets the pan down and goes through a complicated pantomime which Thompson takes to mean that she has to go back and hoe the garden which he knows must be wrong because he has seen no garden. He smiles and nods. She kisses him and walks back into the jungle in the direction of the rice paddies.

Around three in the afternoon Thrun returns to the hootch. She comes to Thompson and kisses him then smiles at him and motions for him to follow her. She leads the way down one trail and up another for two hours until they come to a sluggish, muddy stream about ten feet wide and a foot deep. The stream runs out of the rice paddies, and looking around, Thompson can see that they have worked their way clear around the village and are to the east of it.

Thrun breaks two leafy branches off a small tree. She hands one of them to Tommy and wades into the stream. "Tommytommy," she says. She points into the stream where she wants him to be. As Thompson wades in alongside her, she begins flailing the water with the branch, working her way upstream toward a place where a small stream has created a little bay. Thompson follows
her beating the water.

When they are well into the bay Thrun reaches into her blouse and pulls out a net with a wire rim. She unfolds it, shapes it into a circle and sails it toward the shallows. As the four-foot-diameter net settles into the water Thrun tosses her branch aside and drops to her knees. She reaches under the net and begins groping around.

She pulls a fish which looks like a sunfish out from under the net. It's about two and a half inches long. She puts it in one of her pockets and reaches back under the net.

When she has pocketed fifteen or so fish she stands and shakes the net out. She folds it back up and puts it back under her blouse.

"Tommytommy," she says, followed by a long sentence in Vietnamese. She kisses his cheek and tugs at his arm. As they move back into the jungle Thompson says, "I sure wish I knew what you were saying."

Thrun puts her finger on her lips and shushes him.

They emerge from the jungle west of her house just as it is getting dark. The dog comes running toward them wagging its tail. Thrun pulls a small fish from her pocket and gives it to the dog. Tommy follows Thrun around the house to the lean-to where she hangs the fish net to dry. They go back round the house and enter. Tommy lights a
cigarette and watches Thrun put the fish into a big kettle along with the diced up plant stalks which she had cut that morning. She builds a fire and hangs the kettle from the rod which had served as a spit on the other occasions.

Thrun begins sweeping the floor while Thompson watches the pot. Watches the eyeballs watching him. The dog comes in and begins dancing on its hind legs, scratching at Tommy's leg. He kneels and scratches its ears as Thrun sweeps the imaginary crumbs out into the yard. She returns the broom to its corner and comes to the table where she lights the candle.

Thompson steps to his pack and takes one of the canteens off. He reaches in one of the pockets and removes a packet of pre-sweetened Kool Aid which he stirs into the canteen. He takes a drink and offers it to Thrun. She is delighted with the drink and takes another. She goes into another long sentence in Vietnamese. He takes a plastic bag containing nine more packets of Kool Aid from the pack and carries it to the shelf where he sets it alongside the picture of her husband.

Thrun smiles and kisses him. Thompson kisses her back.

The fish eyeballs staring at Thompson almost ruin his supper, but he tries his best to ignore them. The stew has a delicious taste and he even takes seconds, trying
his best to evade the eyes with his bowl.

After rinsing and putting the bowls away, Thrun turns the dog outside and hooks the loop of rope over the peg in the wall. She moves to the table and blows the candle out and then makes out the bed. Once again removing only his jungle boots, Thompson follows her into bed.

They come naturally together. Thompson kisses her gently at first, then more insistently. His tongue slides inside her mouth. His hand moves to her breast. His middle finger teases her nipple until it is erect.

Thrun stiffens. She says, "Ssssst."

Thompson can hear the dog outside the door growling low in its throat. Thrun hurls the covers back. Grabs Thompsons boots and thrusts them at him. She points at the window. Thompson pulls the boots on, grabs his pack and rifle and steps around the table to the window. The dog barks once, yips and is silent. Thrun pushes him toward the window.

He sets his pack down on the ground and follows it. As his feet touch the ground the shouting begins at the door. Thompson drops to his knees and crawls deeper into the shadow next to the building. He shoulders his pack and grips his M-16.

The door bursts open slamming against the wall. The dark shapes of four men enter the hut. They are
shouting. One of them lights the candle. Thompson crouches lower. One of the men says something and one of the others steps outside. He returns with the body of the dog. Its head is turned around backward. It is disemboweled. Its eyes stare. Its lips are drawn back showing the snarling teeth.

The man slings the dog against the wall. One of the other men pulls an empty C-ration can from beneath his shirt. He asks Thrun something. She shakes her head. He asks her another question and she shakes her head again.

"The canteen." Thompson thinks. "The fucking canteen." His hand goes to where it should be. Gone. A shout comes from the house. Thompson watches the N.V.A. soldier pour the Kool Aid out on the table. He flings the canteen at Thrun hitting her on the arm.

Thompson's thumb moves to the safety on his M-16. "It jammed." He thinks. "The fucking thing jammed in the ambush. It was fucked up when they issued it to me. That's why somebody else got rid of it. It's still fucked up."

One of the N.V.A. slaps Thrun's face hard, knocking her to her knees. He pinches her nipple hard. She screams.

Thompson squeezes his M-16. The N.V.A. pulls down his pants and thrusts his penis at Thrun's face. She turns her head. He slaps her hard once on each side of her face.

"A grenade." Thompson thinks. "If I just had a
grenade."

"That'd just bring the rest of 'em."

"How many more are there?"

"You've got to do something."

"What?"

"Something. You can't just let them do this to her?"

"Why not? She's just a gook."

"You fucking coward. Do something."

"I can't. The rifle might jam. What if it jams? She's just a Vietnamese."

Thompson moves away from the window. Away from the house. Across the narrow strip of rice paddy into the jungle where he squats waiting, watching the house.

An hour later he hears one shot. The four N.V.A. emerge from the house and begin moving back across the rice paddy toward the village.

Later, much later, when the east is beginning to turn pink, Thompson creeps from the jungle, back to the house, back to the window. The candle has burnt down. The flame is flickering. Thrun lies half on, half off the bed. Her legs and stomach are covered with semen and blood. The broom handle is jammed up inside her vagina. Half her face is blown away. The candle glows wildly and goes out.

Thompson moves around the house to the lean to. He opens the door and begins pulling salt pork out of the
box and putting it in his pack. He grabs some snares and the fish net and crosses the dike and disappears back into the jungle. Heading north to skirt the village and then east. Stay in the jungle. Avoid the main paths. Avoid the villages. Stick with the streams. They lead east toward the sea. And always the argument rages in his head:

"Fucking coward. You could have stopped them."
"I could have gotten killed. What if the rifle jammed?"
"You'd be better dead. What the fuck good are you?"

"Bullshit. My job is to live. Get back to the company. Not to save Vietnamese lives."
"Job, my ass. She saved your life. She cared about you. She's the first woman who ever cared about you."

"Bullshit. She was a gook."
"Coward. You had an obligation. You fucked up as usual. You never do anything right."

And on and on. Push the branches aside and let them swing back. One step after another. Stop at dark and eat. Sleep in the rain and dream. Wake and walk and on the seventh day a smell from his pack lets him know that the pork has gone bad.

"Well soldier." He sneers. "Time to feed yourself. Thank God for the snares. Thank God for
what...she showed you. I can always cut stalks like.....Fuck it. I can't think of that."

Snare game and catch fish and follow the streams to the east. Cut stalks and eat them and follow the streams which grow ever bigger and ever deeper as more streams join them, and forty days from the day the long range patrol died, the pointman for Charlie Company, First of the Twelvth Cav. almost steps on a gaunt, bearded, half naked man sleeping on a trail beside a river. A dead monkey is wired to his pack by its hind legs.
In The Big War
By Jim Pitzen

Ch. 1

Tommy, on acid, sees some "history"

Three dollars an hour was the minimum wage in the 1980's which is about where our story begins. The gold standard was what caused Dorothy to go to Oz. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was a rich man who kept the poor men of the country from starting a revolution and killing all the rich men. He granted the poor people some concessions. The flag was a piece of cloth with some dye on it. The Bible was a book and big business was big business and all three helped to perpetuate the myth that you can get ahead by Honesty and Hard Work. Jesus was another man who was interested in revolutions and stuff. He was born about three years Before Christ. His name was mentioned of page 476 of The Bible.

I used to be crazy. They say I'm better now. They said that I was crazy because I knew things which no one else knew. They also said I was crazy because I could always tell what other people were thinking and feeling even when they didn't know that they were thinking it. I could even tell what they knew when they didn't know they knew it. I never have known what
is going on inside me, what I'm thinking or feeling.

They locked me up because I made them feel uncomfortable. The two guys who came to my hotel room to get me acted really nice, as if they liked me. They were thinking, let's get this stinking bastard to Ching so we can get back to the bar. "Ching" was Ching-Wa-Ching, a place where they took crazy people. They hung a chart on the end of my bed. It said, Tommy Thompson Jr. I believed them. This place used to be a t.b. sanatorium, but hardly anyone catches t.b. anymore.

They also locked me up because I drink alcohol and smoke pot and masturbate and drop l.s.d. when I can get it which is pretty often. When I'm on acid, I can not only tell what people are thinking, I can tell everything about them and all their ancestors back to about 1840 or so. If I'm in a town on acid, I can remember the real history of the town. What I discovered is that when I'm on acid, time is not linear, but that all time takes place at once. When I'm on acid, I can see everything. Most times I just know things the way you know things in dreams. When I'm on acid, the things I know all take place at once, like sitting in front of a million televisions at once with a different story on each one of them and not being confused. Acid makes me feel good.
Most people use god to make them feel good. I use Acid. I tried the god thing and it didn't work. I'm not very patient. Acid is quicker than god. I don't have to go to church and listen to some long winded preacher tell me how to find it. All I have to do is contact a dealer. I get l.s.d. in the institution from one of my guards (they call them practical nurses.) I buy it with my government pension check. I get money from the government because I lost an arm in Vietnam. Also because I went crazy in Vietnam, though they didn't lock me up over there. It was all right to be crazy while you were in Vietnam. It wasn't all right to lose an arm. That was called "destroying government property."

Ching-wa-ching is a nice place as long as I can get acid. It sits along one of the back bays of Leech Lake in northern Minnesota, near a town called Crawler. Crawler is a rather dreary town of 943 people, with a rather dreary (official) history. Some old woman in town wrote a history of the town. She was the wife of one of the big shots and the history is pretty phony. It makes her ancestors and the ancestors of the other big shots look like pioneer heroes. I'm the only one who knows the real history.

Grey smoke from the campfire curled through the
autumn-yellow leaves of the birch and wound through the branches of the huge white pine which guarded the shores of the lake. The smoke lost itself in the dusk of the night. The creek was nearly dry. The creek, the beginning of the Great Ojibawa War Trail. The little creek ran out of the chain of lakes and into the big lake which the French called "Lac de la Sang Souix" (lake of the extortioners) because the band of Ojibawa who inhabited it charged a tribute to allow them to cross it. In later years a small, depressing, unchanging town would stand where the campfire was and the people of the town would call the big lake "Leech Lake" never dreaming that the name came from the dim, smoky past and that it referred to human leeches, not the slimy inhabitants of the lake. But then, there were a great many things which the inhabitants of the future town would not know and very few to which they would admit not knowing. But then again, that all comes at a later point in time, if time has points and is linear, which the inhabitants of the future town would hasten to assure you was true (among many other things.) The Big Shots of the town (and if a town has Big Shots it must have small shots) would hasten to assure you that the minimum wage and unions and going off the Gold Standard and Franklin Delano Roosevelt were the Evils which caused the downfall of Our
Country and the end of the American Way of Life and the loss of respect for The Flag and The Bible and Big Business. The small shots of the future town would say, "Jesus it's hard to live on $3.00 an hour."

But all this (except the Jesus stuff) was to take place in the times to come and was of no importance to the young Indian man who fed small, dry branches into the fire which by then wasn't smoking. What was important to him was the long barreled muzzle loader resting against the white-pine tree. It was a new rifle, exacted as tribute from the French. It was not a very good rifle, nor was it a very accurate one, but the young man didn't know that and neither did the thick-shouldered, woodland buffalo, the last of a once numerous species, which was wandering past his camp. If the young man had known that the rifle was not accurate, he might not have shot at the buffalo. If the buffalo had known, he might have come closer so he could be killed outright and not need to suffer the agony of a half ounce of lead eating at his shoulder. But neither of them knew, and the young man shot the buffalo and the buffalo ran away and eventually, blind with pain, blundered into a bog where he foundered himself. and so died the last of a species.

The bones would be pushed up by a beaver as part of a dam one hundred and forty years later and
the young man who would find them would say "What the fuck?" Which is about where our story begins.

The first white man who came to settle, came by ox cart on a vague trail that followed the Mississippi River until the river began to swing east before swinging back west. There he bought a birch-bark canoe and began the struggle of getting all his goods to a spot which he was looking for, which he would know only when he saw it. The most difficult items for the man to haul in the canoe were the ox cart and the oxen who kept shitting in the canoe and putting their feet through the birch bark bottom.

When the settler got to the place where, twenty years before, the young Indian man had shot at the buffalo, the brave soul attempted to land his canoe where the creek joined the lake. One of his oxen, Oscar the oxen, got excited to get on land and shit a bushel-full and thrashed about so that the canoe was a total disaster. The settler got pissed off and shot both his oxen and built a fire of his ox cart (on the exact spot where the young Indian man had built his fire.) The settler roasted his oxen while he danced nude around the fire, shrieking obscenities at God.

The very next day the settler uttered the only word (except for cursing at God and his oxen)
that he had uttered since bargaining for the canoe. He smelled a dead fish which had washed up on the shore. It was a muskellunge twelve feet long and one hundred and forty pounds. "Fish," said the settler, or rather croaked the settler. And in this manner the town (for this was to be the future town) got its name and at the same time the settler discovered that he had cancer of the larynx. He decided to commit suicide, not because of the cancer, because of the smell of the fish, but he missed and shot off half of his nose (he, too, had a French rifle.) But the settler didn't mind because then he only had to smell half the fish.

In this way the settler found his ideal spot to live, the place he would know only when he saw it, which is about where our story begins.
chapter 2

Tommy has three flashbacks

When I woke up this morning I thought that the men from the power house had moved a mountain in right up next to the window. All I could see was a huge grey thing that blotted out the world. Then the sun came up and burned off the fog. They'd just turned the fog machine on. They do that about twice a month in the summer. I used to think that they did it to keep us crazy, but one day two men from the power house came by. One was big and half bald. He had big flat feet. The other one was small and skinny. The big one was thinking with nine tenths of his mind, "That smart-assed engineer. Edjukated idjit. That's what. I know more than him, but he gets twice as much money."

The small one was thinking, "Fucking big brainless bastard. I know twice as much as he does and he gets paid more than me."

I knew then that they were just as crazy as me.

Sometimes I get confused. I can see
everything that is going on around me, and inside other people. Sometimes I only know what I see and hear. I never know what's going on inside me. I never really know what I'm thinking or feeling. That bothers me. Right now I can hear my psychiatric social worker's heels clicking down the tiles in the hall. I can only hear her. Sometimes I can see her. I know that she is going to stop and talk to me. I can feel that in her mind. I can also feel that her abortion is bothering her again. My social worker is an angry feminist. She hates men. I had a psychiatrist who also was an angry feminist. She had had an abortion too. Also I have had three other social workers who were angry feminists who had all had abortions. I don't know if having an abortion makes you be an angry feminist, or if being an angry feminist makes you have an abortion. Every time I try and probe their thoughts, I pick up the anger. I'm afraid of people's anger. My step-father used to get angry. He did things to me. I can't remember those things because I don't like them.

She opens the door and smiles. Her name is Rose Larson, but nobody calls her Rose. They call her Ms. Larson. She is tall and has dark-brown hair down to the middle of her back. She never means it when she smiles. Her eyes smoulder. They are almost black
and they burn holes in people when she looks at them.

I knew another woman with black eyes, but hers were soft and warm. I can't think of her now.

I smile back at my social worker and say, "Don't let it get you down, Doc. The kid would have miscarried anyway. His dad was exposed to agent orange."

Her face turns white and she whirls and leaves the room. Her skirt lifts up. Her legs are tanned. I want to do something, but can't remember what. Maybe a hit of acid will help. When I see legs I think of Virginia, a girl in high school. I liked her. She didn't like me. She told me once, "Tommy, go crawl back under your rock."

Virginia was a cheerleader in high school. I was a janitor after school. Cheerleaders weren't supposed to talk to janitors. I had all the keys. I used to watch Virginia change clothes. I would hide in a janitor's closet and watch through the key hole. She wore white underpants. I would masturbate. Sometimes I would unlock her locker and put her underpants on and masturbate. I don't know why I did this. I always felt sick afterwards, and guilty and I'd promise myself that I'd never do it again, but I always did.

If my step-father had found out he
would have done things to me, then prayed about it.

One time I just got her underpants back in her locker and got hidden when she came back in. She put the underpants on, then realized that the crotch was wet. She asked Margie why. I knew why. I got very excited and masturbated again. I could masturbate lots then. Now I only have one arm and I get tired.

I'm going to get a new doctor. This one's a psychiatrist. I can't tell what his name is, but nurse Dockett is thinking about him. Nurse Dockett doesn't have long legs. I sit in the chair while she changes the sheets. Nurse Dockett's boyfriend gets me the l.s.d. She doesn't know. She thinks that he is above doing that sort of thing just for money. He thinks that she is stupid, but a good piece of ass. They don't know it yet, but she is pregnant. She is not going to have an abortion. He is going to do the right thing by her. They are going to get married and have three more children and get a divorce because he drinks every day and won't go to A.A.

A.A. is a place where alcoholics go to get better. I went to A.A. for a while and I did quit drinking, but I couldn't stand getting better. It hurt too much.

The three social workers who had abortions
went to A.A. Lots of social workers are alcoholics. The lucky ones go to A.A. The unlucky ones don't believe that they are alcoholics. I've had two doctors who were alcoholics, but did not believe it. Lots of psychologists and psychiatrists are alcoholics, but very few of them believe it. Some of them say that A.A. doesn't work. Usually these are the ones who drink the most.

The social workers almost all come from alcoholic homes. The doctors don't.

I can't tell if my new doctor is going to be an alcoholic or not. Sometimes I need to meet people before I can tell things about them. Sometimes I can get all the information I need from other people. For instance, I know that eighty-five out of the one hundred and three nurses who work here come from alcoholic homes. It's a good thing that there are alcoholic parents or there wouldn't be many nurses. Nobody would clean up someone's shit for the wages they pay nurses. Hospitals would have to start paying nurses maybe a tenth as much as they pay doctors. Doctors would get sore. Bills would go up.

I remember one person who I could tell nothing about until I knew him for a long time. His name was Charles Crockett. We called him Davy. He died in Vietnam.
The black jungle night grows blacker. Mosquitoes sing. Far away a frog calls, "re-up, re-up." A little closer a lizard answers, "fuck you."

Crockett slips back into the shallow ditch which Tommy has been scraping out of the sticky yellow clay with his entrenching tool. Crockett whispers, "Thompson."

Tommy turns. Crocket whispers, "Where's Zapeda?"

Thompson points with his thumb toward the command hootch, two ponchoes snapped together and draped over a rope strung between two trees. Thompson folds the blade of his entrenching tool back against the handle. He sits on the edge of the two-foot deep hole. He sighs.

Crockett says, "I lost my lucky rope today. I'm scared. I'm going to get it. I know it."

"Bullshit."

"I mean it. I've carried that rope ever since our first rappel. Remember? When they shot the helicopter down?"

"I remember. The day Black bought it."

"Yeah. I am. Going to get it. That rope was luck. Will you send a letter to ma? I'll give you the address."
"Bullshit. Knock it off. Keep thinking this way, you will get it."

Zapeda slides down alongside them. "Who'll get it." he asks.

Thompson waves his hand. "Nothing." He says. "Just some bullshit. What's up for tomorrow?"

"We're movin' out at oh-nine-hundred. Down toward the sea."

The men sit quietly in the darkness. They pay little attention to the mosquitoes, just rub their bare arms now and then smearing ten or fifteen bloody insects into the hair on their arms. The hundred-degree heat of the rain forest has cooled to eighty-five degrees. Zapeda shivers and whispers, "Who's got first shift?"

Thompson shrugs.

Crockett says, "I'll take it."

The others grin. Crockett hates to wake up. He'll do anything for a few minutes sleep. In the jungle the frogs call, "Re-up. Re-up." Three eighteen year old men sit. Listening. Watching.

At ten o'clock Crockett whispers, "Go to sleep. Boring bastards." Thompson lies back on the ground with his helmet for a pillow. Zapeda curls up on his side with his knees tucked into his chest and his left arm under his cheek. Both men have their
M-16's in their right hands, their thumbs resting on the safeties.

The mosquitoes hum, and draw the blood of the three men. The re-up frog quiets down, but the fuck-you lizard catches his second wind. From the jungle comes the screech of a big cat, a panther or a tiger. Crockett shivers. He stares into the blackness. Listens. A stick breaks. He flips the safety off. His foot reaches for Thompson' foot, hesitates, reaches, stops. Wait. It might be an animal. Fuck it. He settles back down. Forces himself to relax. Returns the rifle to the safe position. He glances at Thompson and Zapeda. Both sleeping. He hears a snake sliding through the grass. He squints hard into the night. A hard-shelled flying insect about half the size of his face bounces off the his helmet and lands in the grass. "Goddamnit. I hate this shit." He mutters. Tears of self pity well up in his eyes and are blinked away.

His head nods. Bobs up. Nods. Bobs up. He curses. Squints at his watch. A quarter after twelve. Fifteen minutes to go. I'll never make it. I can't do it. He stares at the night. The hum of the mosquitoes. The singing of the crickets and frogs. He jerks awake. Checks his watch. Twenty after. He stirs around. Wiggles. Scratches the inside of his
ear. Wonders if there's any wax on his finger. Thinks about licking it. Shivers and wipes it on his pants.

He remembers Julie, the first girl he ever dated. They were in love. Maybe they were. Crockett isn't so sure anymore what love is. He remembers Julie. Fifteen years old. Blonde. Brown eyes. Slim, and firm breasted. Julie who had licked the inside of his ear and how he had gotten an erection and found it hard to breathe and moaned deep in his stomach and felt his legs tighten up and spasm. He remembers how he was afraid that Julie would taste wax and hate him. Remembered that he couldn't remember if he had washed inside his ears before he picked her up.

He looks at his watch. Twenty-one after. Nine minutes to go. He thinks about turning the watch ahead, but doesn't.

At twenty-five after, his foot nudges Thompson's foot. Tommy sits up. Awake. His thumb checks the safety on his M-16. Crockett whispers, "Nothing happened." He hands the watch to Thompson.

Two eighteen-year old men sleep. One sits guard. The mosquitoes hum and draw their blood.

At three p.m. Thompson nudges Zapeda's foot and the two men exchange the guard without speaking.
Zapeda stares into the jungle.

Zapeda was over at Adams's position when it happened. I was taking a piss. Crockett was thinking about his mothers cooking. One mortar round dropped in. It was a direct hit.

The c-ration ham and lima beans he'd just eaten and a bunch of shit and guts were all over the ground. There was so much blood. It was bright red on the green grass. It made the clay red. I cried. Zapeda vomited. He was pissed at Crockett for dying and felt guilty for being pissed. He didn't tell me this. I just knew. I felt guilty for being alive. Having to take a piss is a hell of a reason to be alive.

I feel guilty lots. I also wonder why, in the books I've read about war, nobody ever has to piss or shit. We did it all the time. Every day. Maybe people in the wars before Vietnam knew something we didn't. I wish they had told us. I hated shitting in the jungle. The mosquitoes loved to chew on my ass. It was always uncomfortable. My asshole always itched afterward.

I don't mind shitting here in Ching. The bathrooms are very clean. Sometimes the seats are cold. Once they forgot to wash the acid off and my
ass burnt for a week. But, mostly, I don't mind.

It's time for our walk in the grounds. The Med. Nurse just came by. She didn't have anything for me. Some of the nurses are young and nice. The Med. Nurse is old and nice. Some of the nurses aren't nice at all. One nurse who isn't nice is young nurse Swanson. One day a year ago she was in the room with Tucker, a Vietnam vet who fused some circuits in his brain with angel dust. She was masturbating him. When she came out of the room I said, "Don't worry. He can't tell anyone and I won't."

Nurse Swenson gasped and hurried down the hall. She doesn't seem to like me.

I once tried telling what Tucker was thinking, but almost fried my own mind. It was weird. For two hours I was hearing colors and seeing sounds and kept flinging my clothes off everytime the nurses would put them back on. They finally restrained me. I never tried to communicate with Tucker again. I think that Tucker could tell that I was inside his mind. It felt like he could tell what I was thinking.

There was a Vietnamese woman who I met once who could sometimes seem to tell what I was thinking. At least she couldn't speak English and I couldn't speak Vietnamese and yet we got along for a while. She had soft, black eyes and long hair. I can't think
about that now.

The sun's really getting hot. I've got to move so my face is shaded. I hate to move. Once in a while I can hear a squirrel snore in the hollow limb above me. The last hit was a dandy. Acid, I feel good. I guess.

Nurse Lodge is undulating down the sidewalk toward me. She is one of the most attractive women I have ever seen. Not pretty or beautiful, but attractive. She is tall and slim, but she walks with her shoulders back and her head high. So many tall, slim women walk hunched up as though they are constipated. Nurse Lodge's arms are her best features. They are long and slender and graceful like a dancer's arms. Her arms make watching her walk a pleasure and an adventure. Her hands are slim, her fingers, long. Her hands act as if they hadn't a care in the world as they float around on the ends of her arms.

Nurse Lodge has a care in the world. Her mother is a retired kitchen worker. Her mother began working here in 1939 and in 1940 she met and married the assistant to the assistant assistant of Ching-Wa-Ching. Nurse Lodge has a care in the world because her father was caught sneaking food out of the kitchen and selling it to a supermarket in town. Her father
chose the honorable way out, he blew the top of his head off with a shotgun (American-made.)

Nurse Lodge is afraid that she may have inherited the tendency to be a thief from her father. She is also worried about what people think of her because of what her father did.

Actually the assistant to the assistant assistant was not her father at all. Her father was one of the German prisoners-of-war who worked the old State Farm which provided food for Ching during what some of the American Legionaires called the Big War, World War Two. Other Legionaires, the older ones called World War One "The Big War."

Nurse Lodge's real father called himself Max Schnell. He was tall, blonde, blue-eyed and handsome. Max was the perfect Aryan. He met Nurse Lodge's mother one night outside the kitchen as she was carrying garbage out. Max told her that he was a farm boy who was drafted and put in the infantry guarding the coast of Italy. Actually his name wasn't Max Schnell at all. It was Friedrich Hadyl. Friedrich was the famous Beater of Belsen. He had personally beaten to death with a club seven thousand, three hundred and two Jews, Gipsys, Catholics and other subversive threats to the Third Reich.

Nurse Lodge's mother and Friedrich made
love among the garbage cans to an audience of several skunks and one racoon who had lost his tail in a trap. The animals were more angry than entertained. They wanted to get to their supper. They were gourmet animals and Ching had the best garbage in the north woods.

Nurse Lodge's mother and I are the only people in the world who know who her real father is. Neither of us will tell. When Friedrich Hadyl was caught up with by the Jewish Army in El Paso, Texas (where he was a millionaire television preacher) in 1965 and his picture was in all the papers and on television, Nurse Lodge's dear old mother sighed once for her lost youth, shrugged her shoulders philosophically and stirred the forty gallon container of pork hocks and sauerkraut which was simmering on the stove.

Nurse Lodge slows and says hi to me. She always talks to the patients. She looks right in my eyes and says in her tingling voice, "Good morning Tommy. Don't you just love being alive on a morning like this?"

Then she walks on with her long arms flowing around her.

I think I must be some sort of a pervert or a male chauvinist pig because when she says things like
that to me and walks away, I get a sticky spot in my underwear.

My arms are not long and slender and graceful. My right arm has a small upper part and a large lower part like Popeye the Sailor Man. My left arm was shot off in Vietnam just below the elbow (the elbow of my arm, not the elbow of Vietnam which was located near Saigon.)

We were coming into a landing zone. The sun was in our eyes.

Helicopter blades chop the air. The vibrating, pounding engines drown out all thought. The rice paddy looks small to the men in the chopper. Small and pale green in the middle of a dark green jungle. Tommy is in the fourth ship in line. There are twenty more ships trailing behind. Two gun ships ride low ahead of them.

Swenson grips Thompson's left arm hard. He points with his chin. Thompson's guts tighten in fear. Smoke trails from the rocket holders on the gun ships, down, down in graceful arcs. Down to explode in the jungle. The first ship in line rolls sidewise. Bodies tumble like rag dolls. Arms and legs flop over and over. Thompson looks at Swenson. He shouts the word, "Haggerty?"
Swenson nods. Thompson feels the need to have a bowel movement.

The choppers drop toward the rice paddy. His guts rise toward his throat the way they did when he was a kid and riding down a roller coaster road in a car.

The blades of the chopper kick up the shitty rice paddy water and hurl it around. They bail out. Hit the muck. Rise and run. Run. Dive into the muck. Up and run. Run toward the trees with breaths ripping their lungs. Swenson goes down clutching his thigh. The rest keep running, their chests on fire. Down and roll. Up and run. AK-47's clatter. A rocket round whines toward them. They hit the muck. Thompson shouts, "We can't stay here." He gets up and charges the trees thinking, "Yeah, but you can't run any more either you stupid, stupid bastard....

Clean sheets. Clean white sheets. There's something wrong. He smells different. Like soap. Thompson looks around. A hospital. His left kneecap itches. He reaches down to scratch it. Nothing happens. He tries to lift the covers. Nothing happens. His right arm lifts the covers. No arm. His left arm is gone. He lowers the covers again.

"How am I going to masturbate? I'll have to
use one hand. How'll I button my pants? How'll I light a match? I'll only need one glove. I'll get out of Vietnam."

I did get out of Vietnam too. I get a pension for losing my arm and my mind. I also lost all my teeth right after Vietnam. The government gave me plastic teeth and a plastic arm. Neither the teeth or the arm worked very well. The pinchers on the arm were too strong for light tasks and too weak for heavy ones. I did lay bricks and blocks with it for a while, but it made my arm sore. The plastic teeth hurt my mouth so I only use them for smiling. I take them out during meals. I have an extra set in a glass of water in my room. I have lots of teeth.

I have nightmares sometimes. The psychiatrists say that the nightmares will become less threatening. They also told me that I would become accustomed to seeing myself with only one arm and I did, but it still bothers other people. They also say that if I get over my fears of impotence, I'll be able to get an erection when I'm with a woman. I believe them.

They say that I'm impotent because I was exposed to agent orange in Vietnam. Agent orange exposure can cause temporary impotence and the first time I ever tried to have sex with a woman was right
after I'd been exposed. I don't know if that's true. It seems like I did have sex with a woman once, but I can't remember. I try, but I can't. Anyway, the doctors say that I failed to get an erection then so now I think that I can't. All I can do is masturbate. I'm afraid of being with a woman. They tell me that if I could have several erections while I'm with a woman, the fears would go away and if the fear goes away, the impotence goes away. Very big deal.

I tried a few more times to have sex. It was horrible....

The light snaps on over the kitchen table. Two out of the three bulbs are burnt out. Tommy looks quickly to see if there is any gravy or egg on the table. He keeps himself between Carol and the table so she can't see. Her hand is warm in his. Her shoulder brushes his shoulder as they move toward the couch. Their thighs touch. Carol remembers her husband of four months, left behind in South Carolina and Tommy picks up the signals.

They sink into the reddish-brown couch. Both remove their jackets. Tommy starts to get up to go for another beer, but Carol grabs him. Kisses him. Her tongue enters his mouth, explores his teeth. The roof of his mouth tingles as she licks it. His right
nipple aches as she teases it with a fingernail. Her left hand unbuttons his shirt and lingers on his chest. Her long, straight blonde hair shines in the light from the street-light as it filters through the big white pine tree in the yard.

She unbuttons her blouse, places Tommy's hand on her small breast. Her nipple is erect beneath his palm. She unzips his jeans. Unbuttons them. He raises up and she slides them off. Tommy moans deep in his chest as her fingernails tease the tender skin of his penis. But it just lies there.

He angrily pulls his jeans up and walks to the corner of the room where he stands staring at nothing, tears in his eyes.

Carol walks to him, touches his shoulder, massages his butt. She kisses the back of his neck.

He drops to his knees, hugs her thighs. "Why in the fuck do I keep trying? It's stupid."

"Tommy? What's wrong?"

No answer

"Tommy? I think I'm going. Home I mean. Back to South Carolina. Now. Tonight. Are you going to be ok?"

He says nothing. Turns his head.

She steps back. Buttons her blouse. Walks to the door. "Tommy? Good luck." She says softly.
"Good bye."

As the door shuts behind her Tommy whispers, "Good bye."

He hears Carol's husband's car start and pull out of the driveway. As the sound fades, Tommy walks to the door thinking, "I wonder who washed clothes today? Whose panties'll be on the line?"

"Please, no underpants. Please stop me. I can't stand to do it again. Please don't let me masturbate."

The door shuts behind him and with a tight feeling in his guts he walks behind the garage into the alley.
I think that eventually they would let me out of this place if I would quit telling everybody what they're thinking, but I don't want to go. Here I can spend all my pension on drugs. On the outside I would have to pay rent and buy food and clothes. I've even been saving money for the first time in my life. I've saved twenty-six thousand dollars in the four and a half years I've been here. It's not all from my pension. Some of it I won playing cards against the night nurses. It's easy to win at cards when you know what the other person has. For a while I felt guilty, but then I realized how much they liked it. They aren't supposed to play cards against the patients and they love feeling that they are getting away with something. The money's buried in a jar in the woods. The grounds here are really nice too, just like a park or a resort. I don't have to mow grass or anything. Sometimes I can go fishing down on the dock. I like fishing because I can't tell what the fish are thinking. I really get tired of knowing everything. It's nice to not know fish. I used to
get so tired of knowing, that I'd go for two or three years ignoring the signals. But I got tired of that too.

Here comes Nurse Gordon. I can hear her shoes squeaking on the tile floor. She's coming to get me to take me to my new shrink. I hope the bastard doesn't keep me too long. I want to get outside.

Nurse Gordon opens my door and says, "Tommy. Would you come with me, please. Doctor Kant said he'd see you now." She gives me a shy smile.

Nurse Gordon and I met on the outside a few years ago. It was when I was trying to quit drinking. We met in A.A. We also met in a group called S.A.—Sexaholics Anonymous which is for people who are having sex problems. On the outside I thought of her as Ruth. In here I think of her as Nurse Gordon.

I get off the edge of the bed and follow her, watching the way her hips move. I hate it when I get a new shrink. If I tell the bastards too much, they'll think I'm cured. If I don't tell them enough they'll think I'm incurable and send me to St. Peter's. God forbid

Doctor Kant. Who the hell is he? I can feel my guts tighten up. Why don't I know anything about
him? Shit, I'm scared. For the first time since Nam. Well, maybe not the first time.

Nurse Gordon knocks at a door with a small, black, plastic card nailed to it with those small brass nails. The card says, Dr. Cant. Shit. I even had his name wrong.

The voice inside says, "Yes? It's not locked."

The man inside is about my age—maybe younger. He's about five foot ten and one hundred sixty pounds. He has a brown beard which is shot through with grey whiskers.

He says, "Tommy. Have a seat please. Thank you nurse. Close the door behind you, if you would." He turns to me. "Now, Thompson. I've read your files and they don't tell anything about you. You've been bullshitting a lot of people, including yourself, for a long time. The bullshitting's over. You may sit there and say nothing at all, but you're not going to bullshit me. I know you, Thompson, and you don't know me. How does it feel to be out of control? I, too am a Vietnam vet. The Big Red 1. I'm a recovering alcoholic and drug addict.

"I see that you've not had a drink since they brought you in here nearly three years ago. Your files
say that you went to A.A. on the outside and to a few meetings in here?"

"Yeah." I answer. "I did."

"Why'd you quit? Remember. No bullshit. I'm not buying it."

This fucker means business. Big deal.

"I don't know. Yes I do. It worked. I didn't want to drink for a while. But I was scared. I couldn't talk. I couldn't say what I felt. They said you have to tell someone everything about yourself to get free from it. I couldn't, Doc. They wouldn't understand."

"When are you going to grow up?" He says.

I feel like he is looking into my guts.

"When will you face the fact that it's not necessary for everyone to understand you? You sound like a five year old. Tommy. You aren't a Vietnam vet who happened to become an alcoholic because of some things that happened to you in Vietnam. You're an alcoholic and drug addict who happened to serve in Vietnam. You've got to quit hiding behind it.

"Tommy. I know I sound tough. I don't like being an asshole. But I care what happens to you. Ten years ago I was you."

The bastard means it. He does give a shit
what happens to me. Even if I don't. Fuck, this guy scares me.

"Tommy." He says. "You don't have the guts to face life on life's terms. I know that sounds social workey, and I'm sure you're tired of social work terms, but it's the simple truth. It really should be no hair off my ass if you die some day on a bad acid trip, and that will happen if you keep it up. It's up to you. I want to help."

I sit staring at the floor. This guy's for real. Fuck. I'm afraid of him. I can't read his mind.

"That's right." He says. "You think you're psychic, and the records show that you may be to some extent. But what has that ever gotten you? Look at you. You're close to forty and you're still running around in pyjamas. You've attempted suicide six times in five years."


"Come in here every morning for two hours and talk. About Nam, Tommy. You've got to dump that
stuff out. I've got most of the other stuff. The things that happened before Nam. I firmly believe that those things will take care of themselves, if we bury Vietnam."

"Where do I begin?"

"At the begining."

"Some of it's hazy, Doc. Some of it's clear as hell. Some of it may not even be real. I don't know anymore. It's all mixed up. Some of it, a month or more I can't remember anything at all.....

I went duck hunting that last day. It was the twenty fourth of October, 1965. I'd been drafted. I felt sick. I could have shot some ducks, but I didn't. I just didn't care to.

For two years I'd been working construction in the summers and going to college in the fall, winter and spring. I didn't really know what I wanted to do, so I figured I'd just keep working for a year and see what happened. I found out. The letter said, 'Your friends and neighbors have selected you.' At first all I could think of was that they'd spelled neighbors wrong. I always thought it was "i before e." It took a while for it to sink in.

From the time I got the notice I felt like I had swallowed a hot brick and couldn't pass it. It
felt like it was lodged in my scrotum.

I quit hunting around noon and came back to town to get ready. I was born and raised right here in Crawler, you know Doc?

The bus ride to Minneapolis went by in a haze. I was out of control. I felt so damned powerless. Scared.

A whole bunch of us, maybe two hundred, were inducted in the Andrews Hotel. It was a real dump. It must have been sixty years old and the owners hadn't done anything to it since it was built. The bricks were dirty, the mortar joints needed tuckpointing and there were more cracked than uncracked windows. The inside was even worse. I was pretty relieved when Tom Morrison, another of the condemned, found out that we were going to load on the train for Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. I didn't even want to spend one night in the Andrews.

The train was a special charter for recruits. It was a noisy, drunken trip. Morrison and I headed for the back of the car. I couldn't see how those guys could drink and raise hell. All I wanted to do was quietly curl up and be sick.

I managed to sleep until about eight in the morning when they pulled us off the train and put
us on busses.

The country was flat and brown and as far as I could see, there wasn't a tree. Somebody said we were in Kansas. I believed them.

When we arrived at Fort Leonard Wood I could see that our six bus loads of recruits wouldn't even be noticed. There were green uniforms everywhere, all rushing madly about. It was like an ant hill that someone has stepped on. Everyone looked like they had lost something and though they weren't sure what it was, they were ready to bite whoever had it.

We spent three days being run around by tall and skinny or short, fat sergeants. We collected clothes and boots and bags and socks. We took test after test and were given a few hundred shots. We were allowed ten minutes to eat, and believe me it was enough. There were real sergeants and fake sergeants with arm bands, all of them shouting at us to move it. And we moved it.

Morrison and I promised each other that we would never let them part us. Ten minutes later he was called out of formation and I never saw him again.

Every morning we were aroused by some big jerk who wandered mindlessly through the barracks
shouting and screaming and kicking bunks around. For breakfast we were given slop. It was either creamed beef on toast slop or powdered scrambled eggs slop. Really though when I think back on it, the food wasn't all that bad. Lots of times at home I didn't get breakfast at all.

The guy who bunked above me was named Frederickson. He was big and raw boned and hard. He came from the Red River Valley of North Dakota. His dad was a farmer. He swore more than any soldier I ever heard.

Frederickson and I sort of teamed up with a kid from Wisconsin named Zaffke and another guy from Nebraska whose name was Spock.

Zaffke was the son of a blacksmith and he looked it. He was six foot one and weighed one eighty five. He would sometimes go two days without saying a word, but when he did talk, people listened.

Spock was five foot ten and might have weighed one twenty five, but I doubt it. He had sandy red hair and an innocent, freckled face. He was always getting in trouble with some sergeant or other. He used the word 'cool' in every sentence. Everything was cool. Cool meant bad, good, indifferent, exciting and almost anything else you could think of. Spock,
like the rest of us, had some college and had dropped out for the same reason. Lack of money and direction.

When the results of all the tests we had taken came back we were all offered the chance to go to Officers Candidate School in Fort Benning. We talked it over and decided that we would stick together and not go. The main objection was that we'd have to put an extra year in the service. Zaffke, I could tell was worried about something, but kept his mouth shut.

In the clear, cold light of day, standing in front of the First Sergeant, I could see what Zaffke was worried about. I was really scared to tell that sergeant that I didn't want to go to O.C.S. especially since he kept telling me what a great opportunity the Army was giving me. I did turn it down, though and so did the others. We were the only guys of the twenty men called into the orderly room who made that choice. The rest were marched out by a young, tough-looking sergeant. We had to stay while the First Sergeant tried to change our minds. His method of persuasion was to swear and threaten and roar. We didn't listen.

Finally he turned and roared over his shoulder, "Captain. Captain Nelson. Come here, sir."
These punks don't want O.C.S."

The captain didn't even come out of his office. He just said, "That's wonderful, First Sergeant. I've got a perfect place for trouble makers. Cut their orders for Fort Carson. They're looking for a few good men out there. They're forming an new batallion for the First Cav."
The First Sergeant grinned and said, "I just want you to remember, you asked for it."

Vietnam. We knew. I was ready to run, but Frederickson just said, 'Fuck 'em. Vietnam can't have as many assholes as Missouri.'

Zaffke grinned and said, "I don't know. I have an Idea that there are as many assholes as there are officers and sergeants."

I believed him.

Well, Doc. They sent us to Colorado and stuck us out in a hell of a place. As Frederickson said, "If we were any further from civilization, we'd have racoons for watchdogs and hoot-owls to fuck the chickens."

"You ain't wrong." I said. "It's pretty though. Who ever thought I'd be looking at Pike's Peak right out my bedroom window."

"Bedroom window, my ass. Through the
cracks in the wall."

Colorado was beautiful, Doc. Maybe the most beautiful place I ever saw. The air was as clean and good as it is here. That was the only nice thing about Basic Training though. I hated it.

We were up before the first crow peed every morning and ran two miles before breakfast. After breakfast we ran the two miles to the physical training area for an hour of calisthenics. After p.t. we ran the five blocks to the theatre where we got to listen to some boring bastard who couldn't find his way out of a latrine, lecture us on map reading or military tactics. Sometimes that was varied with care and maintenance of the M.60 machine gun or P.R.C 10 radio.

Once in a while they would show us an exciting training film which told how they did it in W.W.2. In the Big War. We'd usually catch up on our sleep during the films.

I didn't know much about Vietnam, Doc, but I knew some and it seemed like we should be getting training for jungle warfare, -guerrilla warfare, you know. We were getting World War Two stuff. But it seemed like they should know what they were doing.

After noon, we'd usually double time the
five miles out to the firing range and shoot whatever weapon we were supposed to become proficient on, in my case, the M. 60 machine gun. That was our reward for staying awake in class. If we were unlucky enough to get caught sleeping, we'd get stuck on garbage detail or some equally gruesome thing.

The mountains looked almost black from a distance, Doc. There was snow on top of them. I was so fucking homesick I couldn't stand it. It seemed like the mountains being beautiful just made it worse. I'd sit around and think about Minnesota in the winter, about ice fishing and rabbit hunting and I'd feel awful. The worse part was the feeling that I had absolutely no control over what was happening.

They let us have the time after evening chow to ourselves. We used it to clean our weapons, our barracks, our battalion area and the Company Headquarters building. If we worked fast, we got fifteen minutes to shower, shave, and shine our boots before lights out. I usually slept pretty good.

There was one guy named Wagner who I just couldn't stand. He was big, thick shouldered and had a red pimply face which he just loved to shove in other people's faces to intimidate them. His breath smelled like partridge guts. When it finally got to
the point where I knew I was going to have to tangle with the bastard, I told Frederickson, "I'm going to nail that fucker. I just know it. He won't fucking leave me alone."

"You mean Wags?" He said. "Shit, just go for it."

"If you need any help, Tommy, We're your men." Zaffke urged. "He leaves Frederickson and me alone, but I'm tired of his shit, too. We'll back you."

Just then a rock about the size of a marble bounced off my helmet. It wasn't big enough to hurt, just big enough to be irritating. I looked up and sure enough, there was Wagner, a defiant grin on his fat face.

"You son-of-a-bitch," I screamed. "I'm going to fucking kill you."

I jumped up and grabbed a rock that must have weighed forty pounds. I raised it above my head and started running after him, shouting, "Hold still you beady eyed pig fucker. I'm going to bash your brains in."

He could really run. I chased him for two blocks then stopped. He ran another two before he stopped. When he came back, I knew that I was in for
a fight. He really looked pissed. He hated being
aughed at more than anything. He swaggered right up
to me and before he could do or say anything, I
brought a hay-maker up from the ground and caught him
flush on the adam's apple. He hit the ground like
he'd been shot and started rolling around, gasping. He
shit his pants with a diarrheatic blast. The platoon
sergeant came running up and tried to find out what
had happened. Wags was one of his pets. But no one
would say. I'll have to hand it to Wagner, he never
told anyone.

Wagner couldn't make it in Nam, Doc. The
last I heard, he was in a rear area somewhere near
Saigon, bucking for an unable-to-adjust discharge.
But, I'm getting ahead of myself.

We were given a two week leave before
reporting to Oakland. I went home. They really knew
what they were doing. If I'd had another week to
think it over, I'd have gone to Canada. But I didn't.

By the time we reported in Oakland, they'd
gotten most of our gear loaded. All I could think
about was how Leech Lake had looked when the bus
pulled around the corner leaving town. The lake was
flat calm. There were just a few clouds floating in a
deep blue sky. Tears would come to my eyes when I
thought about it, so I tried to not think.

Have you ever been cruising along about seventy when all of a sudden you realize you're on glare ice, Doc? You have? You know how you step on the brake and it seems like you just pick up speed? That's how I felt. Like I was in the back seat watching myself have an accident. I wanted to open the door and get out, but everything was just going too fast.....

I pause. Stare at the floor. At my bare feet. Dr. Cant says, "Are you all right, Tommy? We can stop if you have to."

"Naw." I reply. "It's just that it's all so clear. I didn't know I remembered so much. I haven't thought about it for so long."

"I'm not at all surprised. Every vet I've helped, remembered almost everything once he got started. Let's face it. Vietnam was the most important single event in your life. I'd be surprised if you didn't remember. Can you go on?"

"Yeah. Sure....

I remember when we were passing under the bridge leaving Oakland harbor. I don't know if it was
the Golden Gate Bridge or not. It was just a bridge, but on it, waving at us, were two beautiful, slim, blonde girls dressed in yellow shorts and white sleeveless tops.

"Son-of-a-bitch, I don't want to go." Frederickson said, as close to breaking down as I'd ever seen him.

I couldn't stand it. I went below. Zaffke hollered after me, "Grab some bunks near the door. It's going to get pretty ripe down there."

He was right, too. We hadn't gone two miles when people started puking. The bunks were hammocks, one on top of the other, stacked four high. I luckily had grabbed a top hammock so no one could puke on me during the night. The hammocks were so close together that if you rolled over, you hit the guy above you and the guy beneath you.

We spent as much time as possible on deck. We were up there from daylight until after midnight every day. During the day they made us do p.t. and pull kitchen duty and stuff just to keep us busy I guess so we wouldn't think so much. But mostly they left us alone.

By the fifth night out we had our routine pretty well established. After supper we all would
sneak to a hiding place on deck between some pipes and stuff that was stacked up and strapped down. That night was cool and clear. There were lots of stars out. Spock as usual didn't have any cigarettes and as usual he was bitching about mine. "Jesus Christ, Thompson. I wish you'd start smoking something besides these damned Camels." He said after a particularly violent coughing spell.

"That's why he smokes 'em. He knows that nobody else can stand the fucking things." Frederickson said.

"If you can't smoke a man's cigarette, don't smoke. That's my theory." I replied.

Frederickson stared at me for a moment, then said, "Theories are like assholes. Everybody's got one, but it ain't polite to show it in public."

"You're a regular Amy-fucking-Vanderbilt ain't you? You're a dandy one to talk about what's polite."

Spock started laughing and said, "What that guy did to Bob at supper tonight wasn't polite."

"Laugh, asshole. Laugh." Frederickson said, staring at him.

"What's that?" I asked. "I ate in the first shift. Did I miss something?"
"Fuck." Fredrickson said. "The ship rolled to the left or the starboard or whatever the fuck they call it. My tray slid down the table. When the ship rocked back, my tray came back full of puke."

"Did you finish eating?"

"Fuck you."

I was lucky, Doc. I wasn't affected by the seasickness. I don't know why. It just didn't bother me. Spock and Zaffke were sick off and on through the whole trip, and some guys never quit puking. Well, they must have quit sometimes, but it didn't seem like it.

Between Hawaii and Okinawa we passed through the edge of a typhoon. It's a hell of a sight to stand at the stern of the ship and see row after row of waves forty or fifty feet high. As far as I could see in every direction the grey waves marched away. The stern of the ship would at times be twenty feet above the waves then the waves would be thirty feet above it. I couldn't understand what kept us from going under. I felt pretty small. Shit, the ship felt pretty small.

One night after the typhoon the four of us were on the deck smoking and talking when our platoon leader, a young prick of a second lieutenant, came
around a corner. He stopped flat. Stared. Shouted, "Precisely what do you men think you're doing? You're supposed to be below decks. I've done you guys a lot of favors, but you don't appreciate anything anyone does for you. Get below decks and I'd best never see you up here after dark again, or your asses are going on report."

"Big fucking deal." Frederickson says. "What are they going to do? Send us to Vietnam? Bust me and send me back to the states. See if I care. Fuck. Send me to Leavenworth. Jail's better than Nam."

"You know." Zaffke said lazily. "There's really not a hell of a lot you can do to us." He looked at his watch. "I plan on being here at least another hour and if you don't want to see me here, you'd better leave."

Somehow Zaffke talking slow and easy made an impression on the lieutenant. He warned us as he turned to go, "All right. But it had best not happen again."

Spock started to giggle, but Zaffke hushed him. "Don't push it." He warned.

I realized then for the first time that things were going to be a little different in Vietnam.
They didn't have much power over us. The worst thing that they could do was send us to Vietnam and they were already doing that.
Ch. 4

Arrival in Vietnam

For four hours the ship sat in the breathless heat. We stared in at a shoreline we could barely make out. It was just a darker color than the ocean. We sat, sweating. There wasn't a cloud in sight and the sea was flat calm. The air was thick with salt smell. Finally the landing craft came roaring up alongside the ship. The nets were flung over the side and we began scrambling down as best we could toward the landing craft forty feet below. My hand slipped once and I could picture myself being ground between the ships, but I got lucky. I was dangling by one hand. The machine gun on my back had me over balanced, but some guy caught me and got me straightened up. Without saying thanks, I kept clambering down and down.

I fell the last six feet or so into the landing craft, but Frederickson and Spock caught me.
I staggered to the opposite side where no one could fall on me, and sat down. I think that everyone was scared fartless, but we all reacted in a different way. Spock got jittery and talkative and Frederickson just sat, saying nothing.

I think I was more scared than anyone on any of the landing craft. I had read quite a lot of military history and knew that an infantryman in a beach assault doesn't have a very good chance. The enemy is usually dug in and you have to wade through the water onto an open beach. He can pick you off any time he wants.

The landing craft went roaring in toward the beach. The closer it got, the more scared I got. Landing craft have high iron sides and you can't see out of them. By the time the boat slowed and dropped its ramp, I was about to piss in my jungle fatigues.

The green water came washing in to to boat. As I jumped out I saw on the beach about a hundred American G.I.'s. They were in swimming suits. Some had scuba gear. Some had girl friends. Some were waiting for us to get out of the way so they could resume swimming. All of them were laughing at us. We came charging out of the boats with clips loaded and rifles ready. It was embarassing.
Spock said, "I'd rather be shot at than laughed at."

"I can forgive the cocksuckers for sending me over here, but I can't forgive them for this." Frederickson said.

In my first two minutes in Vietnam I felt scared and stupid and frustrated, but that was good. I got used to it right away.

On the way to base camp at An Khe Zaffke said with a lecherous grin, "Did you guys see the sporty asses on some of those Vietnamese girls. This place is all right. The one with the red hair even smiled at me."

"She was laughing, dumb ass," I replied sourly.

"That's close enough," He said.

We spent our first five days in country setting up a base camp, clearing trees and setting up tents for the orderly room and company supply. Most of the equipment we needed was drawn from Base Supply which was near the center of the main camp. The First Cav. base camp was about ten miles in circumference. We were stuck as far from the main part of camp as we could be and still be within the barbed wire enclosure. The camp was an enormous tent city, with
just an occasional frame building. Most of the trees and brush had been cleared, but out where we were it was still pretty heavy jungle. The entire camp was surrounded by a clearing which varied from two hundred to one hundred yards wide. The clearing was a tangled mess of concertina wire and booby traps and trip flares. There was a small muddy river running through camp. It was pretty dirty and smelled like a septic tank.

On the fourth day when things were almost all set up, Sgt. Johnson came up to us and informed us that we were going to steal a generator for the old man. It sounded pretty funny to hear Sergeant Johnson, the oldest man in the batallion, or close to it, calling the C.O. 'old man' but none of us laughed.

Zaffke, Frederickson and I followed him to the Engineers N.C.O. club where we stole a ton and a half truck. I drove through the muddy camp to Base Supply, right in through the main gate and down another muddy road to a Quonset hut which Sgt. Johnson pointed out.

He got out and said "Have they got that fucking generator fixed yet?"

The Specialist fifth class just shrugged and said, "Shit, I don't know sarge. Check around
behind."

I put the truck in gear and drove to the back of the Quonset hut. I backed the truck to loading dock and shut it off. Zaffke and Frederickson hopped out of the back and I got out of the truck. We walked into the hut and choosing the first decent looking generator which looked small enough to steal, grabbed it and slid it onto the back of the truck. The rails of the generator screeched horribly as it slid across the metal bed of the truck.

On the way past the front of the hut the spec. 5 flagged us down. I thought, oh shit, but he just said, "You found it all right, sarge.?

"We sure did." Sergeant Johnson answered.

We took the generator back to the company area and I returned the truck to the N.C.O. club.

On the fifth night in country Frederickson and I sneaked out of base camp. It was no big trick. They didn't watch all that closely as long as you were American. We wound up in Sin City. Sin City was an unofficially Army-sponsored section of bars and whore houses between the town of An Khe and base camp. We had heard that you could get drunk and laid for three dollars and of course, being sound of mind, we just
had to see if it was true.

After entering Sin City we just wandered up and down the street until we spotted a likely looking den of iniquity. The one we chose had an old Pabst Blue Ribbon sign leaning against the corrugated iron front wall. Inside we discovered that they didn't have any Pabst, but they did have plenty of '33 Beer. A local brand that was awfully foul. We kept telling each other how bad it was and kept on drinking it because it was so good.

The bar didn't really amount to much. It was about thirty by forty feet. There was a short bar along one side and booths along the other. There were tables of varying sizes and shapes and heights down the middle. We were seated at one of the center tables, looking around admiringly at all the girls. There were some curtained-off areas which we knew must be hiding some delightful secrets.

There was a slightly plump girl who had been eyeing Frederickson up and with her was a slimmer one. The chubby one was facing me and I was looking up under her short skirt at her white panties. I told Frederickson 'You know, I always did like short-legged girls with short skirts. I guess when I think about it, I've always liked long legged girls with short
skirts too."

The door burst open, slammed against the wall and someone shouted, "Fucking M.P.'s! Raid."

Frederickson and I hit the back door on a dead run. We ran right into two M.P.'s and bowled them over in the mud. We barely broke stride, just kept pumping our legs for all they were worth. Frederickson was about ten yards behind me and cursing foully. He was panting so hard that the only thing I could hear between pants and the splashing of the knee deep water in the rice paddy was, 'Christ. It's black. I can't see a fucking thing."

Then I was lying on my back seeing white spots before my eyes. The wind was knocked out of my lungs. My face hurt like hell. When the tears had cleared from my eyes I could see that I had run full tilt into the ass end of a water buffalo. This particular water buffalo must have weighed over a ton. He turned and looked at me then slowly moved off into the night.

Blood gushing from my nose, I called Frederickson. "Where in hell are you Bob?" He called back. "Where'n hell are You?"

"Right here. I ran into a fucking buffalo."
The bastard laughed at me, Doc. With a little help from him I got to my feet and back to base camp. Before returning to the company area, I stopped at the river and washed off the blood and other stuff. If you've ever noticed the ass end of a water buffalo you know that it is covered with other stuff.

The next morning we overheard some old timers talking about the ritual raid the M.P.'s had pulled on Sin City. It turned out that every so often they raided just to prove they were doing their duty. They never arrested anyone.

Doc Cant puts his hand on mine. "Well, Tommy. Time's up for today. Are you ok? You handling it all right?"

I think about it for a while and reply, "Yeah. I guess so. Like I told you before. Some things are clear and some I just can't remember. I know there were some other things."

"You did just fine. You can go now. If it starts bothering you, come back in. If I'm gone, the nurses can give you my phone number at home. Be sure to call if it gets too bad. Same time tomorrow?"

"Sure Doc. Whatever you say."