

DEADLY WATERS: THE VIETNAM NAVAL WAR AND ITS AFTERMATH

“A Vietnam veteran struggles with his health as a victim of the U.S. defoliation program in this debut novel...The author deftly transforms his thorough historical scholarship of the Vietnam conflict into a gripping drama...Overall, this book offers what good historical fiction should provide: enthralling drama, believable characters, and scrupulous research. A powerful fictional account of the Agent Orange debacle.”

—**KIRKUS REVIEW**

“A powerfully-written and richly evocative examination of life, love, loss, and the ravages of war, and the different ways people react to unthinkable situations, infused with some heart-pounding action, lighthearted laughs, sweet romance, and shocking twists. This powerhouse of a story is equally packed with action and emotion, and is sure to please even the pickiest of literary readers. I felt a great connection with the characters, and thought the narrative was clean and crisp. It becomes very clear while reading that Randy Miller has found his niche, and I hope he writes more books like this, as it was one of the more fascinating and easy-to-read and realistic historical fiction novels I'd read in a very long time and delivers a much needed message. Great writing, solid characters, and a bold attempt at capturing many important elements in military/social culture in the throes of the ugliness of war and political life made ‘Deadly Waters’ a big hit for me.” [4 stars]

—**Meghan King – Barnes & Noble**

“I positively loved Randy Miller’s ‘Deadly Waters’. He has captured several slices of fascinating parts of American history with accurate details and intense drama revolving around the Vietnam War era, here and overseas, starring an unforgettable cast of characters. But what I loved most about the book was amongst all the ugliness of war is a human story here, one of love and friendship and courage – despite the fact that some awful things happen. Randy Miller tells this important story with finesse and great heart and respect for his subjects and for what happened in Vietnam to the Naval men affected by the waters

that made them sick and how they were treated after the war is over, making it difficult to receive care. It's hard to read through to the end and remain unaffected in some way. A definite recommended read and not just for fans of 'historical fiction', but for those who want an entertaining, educational, and emotionally-engaging novel that is strongly written and well presented." [5 stars]

— **Jhonni Parker – Goodreads**

"This novel by Randy Miller was well-written and researched, and delivers a compelling story that will haunt me for some time – so much so that I have no other option but to give this book 5 stars. It is really an amazing body of work, but more than that it brought the past to life for me in a way that few, if any books have in my recent memory. Miller utilizes skillful literary techniques and artfully captures the essence of humanity, love, hate, fear, anguish, hope, morality and mortality...bringing them to our front door and inviting them in. There is no escaping the 'personal' experience one has while reading this book, and when it happens to the characters, it happens to you. A great combination of humanity [even when it is inhumane] and history, told through a strong narrative that is both rough and shocking at times, but always authentic." [5 stars]

—**Nicola Flood – Indie Book Reviewers**

"This is a message driven, yet action packed novel, which I thoroughly enjoyed. The descriptions of the times as well as the depictions of the various characters were excellent. Mr. Miller is skilled at creating context, and in this novel "Deadly Waters" he effortlessly transports the reader back to the past on the other side of the world, where a great war is raging, and no one is safe from its destruction, even years after returning home. As a British born person this novel enlightened me in a dramatic way – So many times we only hear about the real big events, especially when reading a historical fiction and often times it is sanitized or over-sensationalized. But not here. For Mr. Miller to focus on this particular time and events as relayed by Mr. Zack Martin was brave and I think he pulled it off nicely. Bravo for telling this story." [4 stars]

—**Max Gilbert – Barnes & Noble**

“To say this is totally unlike anything I’ve ever read before would be an understatement. I’m not sure how to even describe this book as SO much happens, and it seems to touch on so many elements, themes, and subjects – from eager, innocent young men off to do patriotic duty, to the nitty gritty of wartime in foreign lands, to young love and trying to build a life, and then with suffering debilitating illnesses and disease. All while the entity responsible for providing care for affected vets are the same ones making it impossible for them to get help, in essence killing them and ruining lives. How was this allowed to happen? Smooth pacing, plenty of action, and amazing characters/personalities, along with true, real life players and historical drama makes this a huge winner in my eyes. An intimate look into some fascinating historical, but also awful times set against a dynamic backdrop of war and U.S. government policies. Incredible detailed writing and will get under your skin and inside your heart and soul. Someone should send this book to members of Congress. Recommend for readers of military nonfiction and historical fiction.” [5 stars]

—**Samantha Ryan – Goodreads**

“Randy Miller can write a complex, engrossing story with rare skill. He shows you a world through Zack’s eyes and makes it matter, makes it believable, and makes it vital. Although set during the Vietnam War, during his tours and afterward, “Deadly Waters” is written with a current feel and strong narrative style that manages to be ‘entertaining’ even when being bleak and violent and gritty and raw. What Miller does well is build, develop, and breathe life into the plot-points based around the actions and relationships of the characters – which is what gives it a distinction over being just some ‘factual documentary.’ He writes great characters that you can believe in, but it’s in interactions that they truly shine. We see him in action with other soldiers and as a man with his wife and family. The action grows at a slow but steady pace through the book and continues to build in dramatic, unexpected ways, taking us to the promised payoff in the end. But even though the ending brought it all home, the journey was more real than I imagined. This [Agent

Orange] is a real problem for thousands of people who put their lives on the line for this country. A book that serves as the voice for those who were neglected. Kudos to the author for mentioning some and for his passion in writing this book. Recommend.” [4-5 stars]

—**Charles Vasquez – Indie Book Reviewers**

“This story really hit home to me since a dear vet friend who later came to live with us until his medical condition and treatment needs exceeded our care-giving abilities. That medical condition was residual effects from Agent Orange poisoning. For eight years he petitioned the government to make claim for those exposure injuries and the residuals, went through diagnostics and multiple evaluations, often duplicative. He finally got his settlement [ridiculously low] and lived long enough to buy himself a big red pickup truck for two months before passing away. I share this first-hand experience to affirm what I know to be the truthfulness of the assertions made in this book. Although categorized as historical “Fiction,” this story effects real-life accounts and events which have been meticulously well researched, taking actual historic events and locations and weaving them together by introducing a cast of believable characters whose experiences may reflect an amalgamation of real people and their own accounts. Zack is a Vietnam vet exposed to Monsanto’s chemical defoliant which came to be known as Agent Orange, and the story shows his journey to get answers, medical care, disability benefits and accountability for the many veterans whose Agent Orange claims were wrongfully denied or misclassified by the government. They also experienced deceit and betrayal by the government they served. The author makes no excuses for the government’s position on the issue, their blatant hypocrisy and the egregious nature of the hoops our vets have had to endure because of them. The author’s “voice” in using short and simple, almost clipped, terms and sentences makes the protagonist’s voice sound authentic. This is not a happily ever after kind of story and the ending, as written, while heartbreaking and devastating, was all too real. The fight continues.” [4-5 stars]

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IN MEMORY OF MANY, IN HONOR OF ALL

A NOVEL BY
RANDY MILLER

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This book is dedicated to “Vietnam Blue Water Navy Veterans,” living and dead, who were exposed to Agent Orange and as a result had their lives and the lives of their families torn apart by the unfair and arbitrary policies of the United States Department of Veterans Affairs.



PROLOGUE

PRIVATE PHAN VAN HUONG of the North Vietnam People's Army was miserable. He stood on a mountain overlooking the anchorages of Qui Nhon in South Vietnam trying to gain at least some shelter from the relentless monsoon rain pouring down on him. The black peasant jacket and pants he wore to replace his North Vietnam People's Army uniform had been soaked far beyond the point where they could keep him warm. His conical straw hat and the palm tree he leaned against provided no protection from the almost solid avalanche of water that fell from the low hanging clouds.

His orders were to stand here and watch the narrow strait separating Qui Nhon's inner harbor from the huge bay and the sea beyond it. The Song Kon River flowed through it all, and cloistered on the banks of the harbor was the headquarters of one of the Viet Cong's greatest enemies: Junk Force Division 22. If he saw any vessels entering or leaving this well fortified basin he was to climb down the mountain and report it to his sergeant. The sergeant and eight other members of his squad were in a hooch taking shelter from the storm and their pleasure with the wife and daughters of the man who had been the hooch's owner until they arrived that morning and killed him.

No matter how often Private Phan wiped the rain from his eyes, it did no good. The blinding downpour made it impossible for him to perform his duties as a lookout. Even worse, he knew if his sergeant should learn he had inadvertently missed any junks or sampans foolish enough to be out in this deluge, he would be severely beaten. But as hard as he tried, he still could not see into the fogbound bay. The rigid discipline of the People's Army made him ignore his uncontrollable shivering as he peered hopelessly at the dense curtain of water streaming down from the angry dark heavens.

Then the sounds of the monsoon diminished ever so slightly. Perhaps, he thought, the wretched weather that has dogged us for the past two weeks was finally letting up. When he looked again, he noticed a faint streak of white just beyond his field of vision. He strained to see what it was although he knew it must be some trick of the storm or his blurred eyes. There could be no white western letters such as he remembered from the French school he had attended as a small child, painted like graffiti on the gray wall of rain and mist.

But he soon saw it was not an illusion. They were numbers written on the bow of a gray ship slowly emerging from the fog. A ship that wasn't at all like the squat, rust-streaked Russian and Chinese freighters he had seen in Haiphong Harbor where his squad had been trained before they were sent to Qui Nhon. This ship was clean and long and narrow and it moved silently into the channel with the motion of the radar antenna on its mast showing that somewhere within it there was a brain looking for something to kill.

Private Phan shivered even more violently as he remembered the most frightening experience of his life. While sleeping in a tree during their two week voyage south, he had been awakened by his sergeant calling them to remove the branches that hid the sampan and begin the night's journey. As he was about to jump down, he saw a cobra moving across the brown forest floor, its tongue flicking from side to side. It had the same silent lethality as this ship, with its searching intensity.

And if this long, narrow ship found prey, he had no doubt it would be every bit as deadly as the cobra. Mounted on both its forward and afterdecks

were turrets, each with twin cannon barrels far larger than any Private Phan had ever seen before.

Fastened to the rear of the mast was an American Flag. He knew it was the hated American Flag from the political indoctrinations he had received. He also knew the large white number on its bow was 894, and that frightened him as much as the cobra had. Thoroughly dismayed by the sight of the heavily armed apparition, he couldn't help but wonder: what chance would a country whose Navy consisted of sampans, junks, and a few torpedo boats have in a war with an enemy possessing 894 such killing machines?

BOILER TENDER Second Class Charlie Bates was in the destroyer's boiler room checking gauges and making certain there was more than adequate steam pressure available if a sudden burst of speed was required of the massive twin 60,000 hp turbines.

The Assistant Engineering Officer in rumpled khakis, was making his rounds and came through the aft hatch asking, "Everything as it should be with the desalination plant, Bates?"

"Yes, sir. The seawater's pretty warm, and the salt content's nice and low. Our freshwater output is good enough for now and if the Captain doesn't authorize a wash down while we're at anchor, we should be okay. How's everything in the engine room, Mr. Borg?"

"Lousy. They're out of java."

"You're in luck. I just made a pot."

Together they walked to the forward end of the space where a percolator sat secured on a shelf. Bates poured them each another of the interminable mugs of strong black coffee that he and the rest of the men depended on to get through their twenty hour work days.

They were both completely unaware that the freshwater they were producing in the ship's evaporators would kill more of the ship's crew than all of the People's Army of North Vietnam ever would.



PART ONE

THE DESTROYER,
USS HAWKE DD 894

*Eternal Father, strong to save,
Whose arm hath bound the restless wave,
Who Bidd'st the mighty ocean deep
Its own appointed limits keep;
Oh, hear us when we cry to Thee,
For those in peril on the sea!*

—The U.S. Navy Hymn



CHAPTER 1

UPON COMPLETION of boot camp, Zachariah Martin was assigned to the destroyer USS Hawke DD 894. Prior to reporting onboard he had been granted a two week leave in Vermont. After flying for only the second time in his life, he climbed out of a late night taxi in his dress blue uniform and wearily wrestled his eighty-pound green canvas seabag up to the San Diego Naval Station's main gate. He presented his orders to the Marine sentry and was given directions to his new ship.

Zack was a country boy born and bred, and he was blown away by the enormity of the base and the miles of ships quietly at rest there. The only noises in the night were their soft thrums as they slept, almost like a calm, steady snore. The countless vessels lining the piers and moored in the harbor appeared as silhouettes in the moonlight. As he walked along, his eyes opened wide in astonishment. Wherever he looked there were warships of every size and shape ranging from gigantic aircraft carriers, down to the smallest of minesweepers. Most of them completely dwarfed the destroyers, which looked sleek and dangerous with their five-inch diameter twin gun mounts.

When Zack found his ship, he saw there were four destroyers tied alongside each other with only one moored directly to the pier. The Hawke was on the end, and he realized he'd have to cross all the others to get there. Being a seventeen year old "Boot," he was intimidated, but nevertheless, took a deep breath, joggled his heavy seabag from his right to his left shoulder, and started up the narrow gangplank.

While in port, all comings and goings were funneled through a ship's "Quarterdeck," which was usually set up on the stern, or in Navy parlance, the "Fantail." He stopped just short of stepping aboard, and came to attention as he had been taught ever so recently in boot camp. With his right hand he saluted the Officer of the Deck or the OOD, "Request permission to cross ovaah to the Hawke, sir." His salute was returned, "Permission granted, sailor."

Zack walked across the quarterdeck, stepped carefully onto the next gangplank, and repeated this procedure two more times before reaching his final destination.

"Seaman Apprentice Mahtin, requestin' permission to report aboahd the Hawke, sir!"

"Permission granted, Martin."

He handed his orders to the OOD who carefully examined them. After determining that Zack was to be a "First Division," or "Deck Force" sailor, he sent his Messenger of the Watch down to awaken someone to take charge of him. This only took a few minutes because his new home happened to be one level down just forward of the fantail.

A thick-set, sleepy young petty officer came topside and said, "Welcome aboahd. Grab youah seabag and follow me." Down in First Division's compartment he pointed to a rack, saying, "Take that top one theyah, and we'll get you squahed away tomorrow."

At 0600 the next morning the shrill warbling sound of the boatswain's pipe came over the ship's Public Address system followed by the announcement, "Reveille, reveille, reveille, all hands heave out and trice up." The lights came on and Zack had his first chance to look around. The men were

piled up like cordwood. The aluminum framed, canvas racks with their thin mattresses were stacked three high with about two feet of space separating them. Only inches divided the rows. Sardines in a can had more room. Underneath the bottom bunks were three footlockers, one for each of the above occupants. To gain access, the bottom man had to immediately jump up and swing, or “trice” up his rack and chain it out of the way. One of the very first lessons Zack learned was to avoid the lowest rack at all costs.

Zack was more than a little lost. Most of the men were in the head preparing for the day when a short, stocky, blond crewman of about his own age saw his predicament and introduced himself, “Hey there, I’m Michael J. Howell.” Reading the name stenciled above the pocket on Zack’s blue chambray work shirt, he said, “You come with me, Martin, and we’ll get breakfast. They serve it until 0730. Then they pipe out ‘Sweepers, sweepers man your brooms’ and everyone ‘Turns-to’ or goes to work, and we sweep and swab the whole ship from top to bottom. You don’t have to do squat though until you get assigned a work space. So, after we eat, you come back here and when I’m finished with Sweepers, I’ll show you where we muster for ‘Quarters.’ ”

“Thanks, Howell.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m only three months out of boot camp myself and I know how confusing it is at first.”

AT EXACTLY 0800, Zack found himself in formation with thirty other seamen and seamen apprentices on the ship’s forecastle, or bow, in the shadow of the mammoth turret known as “Mount fifty-one.” Facing them were the bosses. The head of their Division, in a khaki uniform, was a baby-faced ensign, whose place in the “Commissioned officer” chain of command was at the very bottom. Next to him, dressed in dungarees, were five rugged looking Boatswain’s Mates who were either first, second, or third class petty officers. First and second class petty officers were the equivalent of Army sergeants, while thirds were comparable to corporals. All of them were classified as “Non-commissioned officers,” or “NCOs.” Chief petty officers

occupied the top tier of the enlisted hierarchy, but every commissioned officer, including the lowly ensigns, still outranked them.

Standing apart was a weathered chief in khakis like the officer's, but with different insignias. He had the shrewd, reptilian eyes of an alligator lazily watching his next meal. He was about fifty and of average height, and looked about as hard as an old oak plank. He was wearing a thin lopsided smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

He addressed them in a southern hillbilly dialect, "It ain't no big secret, this here ship be goin' ta Vietnam, and now I got me twelve a yew green-faced fish fuckers right out a boot camp. What in the Sam Hill was the Navy thinkin'? Yew worthless sacks a shit don't know yer asses from a hole in the ground. Yew chikin fuckers are gonta have ta learn right quick. We got no time ta waste trainin' yer dumb-asses. We got mebbe a month before we deploy, so yew green-ass boots listen ta yer boatswains right well. Y'all do what they tell yew, when they tell yew, and how they tell yew and if any a yew fuck up, I'm gonta come down on yew like a ton a bricks. Yew understand?"

Twelve scared "newbies" said in unison, "Aye, Chief."

"Eastman, yew take Martin, and orient him." Shaking his head he said disgustedly, "Mebbe yew two Yankees can understand each other, I sure cain't."

"Aye, Chief," said the same red-headed Third Class Boatswain's Mate who had brought him down to the compartment last night.

"Okay, the rest a yew are dismissed. Y'all git yer worthless asses out a here and turn-to."

AS HE LISTENED to the chief rant, Zack noticed a few things of interest. He was amazed at the sheer volume of tattoos sported by the boatswains. They wore a colorful array of snakes, lions, tigers, eagles, hearts, knives, guns, anchors, sharks, mermaids, women wearing skimpy clothes or none at all, ships, and ship's names, and many a loving tribute to mothers, girlfriends, and wives. The chief's sleeves were buttoned at the wrist, but tattooed below each knuckle on one of his rough looking hands was the word "Hold" and

on the other was “Fast” whereas the first class petty officer’s digits read “Love” and “Hate.”

He saw Ensign Wells trying to keep a low profile just like the rest of the new fish. Could it be that he was the officer equivalent of a “green-ass boot?” Every time the miserable ensign glanced at the chief a look of fear crossed his face.

He also noticed that most of the petty officers spoke with twangy accents that were difficult for him to grasp. Even the Latinos in boot camp had been easier to understand than these boatswains. Zack was from the north and certainly not ashamed of it, but he would come to find out by and by, that in some of the more isolated pockets of the rural south, the Civil War was far from over.

AFTER ALL OF their troops had trotted off to work, Master Chief Boatswain’s Mate James McCoy said to his second in command, Boatswain’s Mate First Class Darnell Slocum, a tall, rangy man of about thirty-five, “I don’t know what the Navy’s thinkin’ sendin’ us this many boots. All it takes is one ta mess up real good, and people are gonta git hurt.”

“It ain’t so bad, Chief. We ain’t alone. Ever’ damn division aboard is in the same fix as us. They jist ain’t enough sailors in the whole damn Navy ta crew all the ships they be sendin’ ta Vietnam right now. Look at us. The Hawke has billets fer three-hunert-thirty-six men, but we be deployin’ with only two-hunert-twenty-five. Now look at the sunny side, Chief, yew and I fought in Korea, and yew served in World War Two. Dixon and yer other petty officers are good solid men. Jist you wait and see, Chief, we’ll whup ‘em inta shape right quick.”

“I sure as hell hope so, Darnell.”

EASTMAN SAID, “Come with me, Mahtin.” He went around the gun mount and started walking aft on the starboard side. As they passed through

the watertight door of the forward break which separated the forecandle from the rest of the main deck, he told Zack "We keep these doowahs shut while we be undahway. It keeps the waves that break ovah the fo'candle fum floodin' the rest of the main deck."

He led Zack up a "ladder" or a very steep set of stairs, to the next level or the "01 deck." They walked aft past a twenty foot long steel cube mounted amidships on a swiveled base. Eastman pointed at it and said, "That theyah is the ASROC Launchah. The ASROC's an anti-submarine rocket. It be the biggest atomic depth change in the world. When it hits the watah, it swims about 'til it homes in on the enemy, dives down and blows that sub ta bits. It nevah misses... What? You look a little shocked, Mahtin. You be on a destroyah. Bettah get used to it. That's what we do: we destroy stuff."

They continued walking aft and stopped at the ship's twenty-six foot motor Whaleboat.

"I guess I should staht out explainin' the wohk spaces. Fust Division, ovah the Deck Fohce as we be mo' commonly called, owns everythin' fum the 01 deck on down. That means you deck apes scrape, wiahbrush, prime, and paint every piece of rust you can find fum heah to the watahline. The salt eats it. We fight it. When it gets too bad, we repaint entiah sections. The ship is a little less than fo'-hundred-feet long, but when you have ouah job, it seems a lot biggah. Latah you will be assigned a specific area to covah."

Zack could take it no longer, and blurted, "Wheah ah you fum? It's so good to heah someone talk without an accent."

"I'm fum New Hampshiah."

"And I'm fum Vamont."

"We be practically neighbahs."

For the first time, they took a close look at each other. They were no longer merely a third class petty officer and a boot, but allies against all those

* See Glossaries in back of book.

around them who spoke in alien tongues. They shook hands. Eastman liked what he saw. Martin was a little taller than average, blue-eyed, brown haired, and wiry. He looked like he could handle himself and do the hard work that would be required of him.

“Nice meetin’ you, Mahtin.”

“Nice meetin’ you too, Eastman.”

“Call me ‘Boats.’ That’s what all Boatswain’s Mates ah called, just like Gunnah’s Mates ah called ‘Guns.’ Let me guess: you come fum a fahm.”

“Good guess, how about you?”

“My family’s always been Lobstahmen out of Pohtsmouth. I been runnin’ small boats since I was a kid.” With pride he said, “That’s why they made me ‘coxswain,’ owah the crew chief of this heah motah Whaleboat. The Captain knows theyah ain’t no seas so big I can’t handle her in, but we’d bettah get movin’, Mahtin, I’ve got a lot to show you. We have so many duties, it might be confusin’ at fust, but don’t worry about it. It’ll all be explained as you go along and aftah a while, it’ll seem like you been doin’ this fo’evah. If you have any poblems just come to me.”

“Okay. Thanks, Boats.”

“No big deal. Us Yankees gotta stick togethah. Now listen, Mahtin, deck apes ah in chahge of the Whaleboat, and responsible fo’ puttin’ her in and out of the watah. We provide the landin’ and boahdin’ pahties, and they ain’t pahties with balloons and clowns. They be pahties with Thompson submachine guns and Browning Automatic Rifles with live ammo. We anchah and mooah the ship. We also man the gun mounts with the gunnah’s mates and man the projectile and powdah magazines durin’ General Quatahs.”

“Why ah we called ‘deck apes?’ ”

“The simple ansah is that all the othah divisions think we be stupid. They think all we do is manual labah, not that theyah be any shame in it. What they don’t know is, ouah job takes mo’ smahts than they give us credit fo’. They’ah too damn blind ta see it’s the Boatswain’s Mates and snipes that run all the ships in the whole damn Navy. Snipes ah the Boilah Tendahs and

Machinist Mates. Without us, no ship could evah even leave the dock. All the othahs look down theyah noses at us, but Yeomen, Radah and Radio Men wouldn't last a day in the Deck Fohce. They might get theyah stahched and pressed dungarees soiled, which'd make 'em cry.

"I'd like to see any of those snotty pukers rig fo' replenishin' at sea. We go alongside othah ships to take on oil and supplies, a hunded feet apaht at fifteen knots, and we do all the riggin' fo' that. Block, tackle, line, winches, and wiah. If someone screws up, othahs can get huht real bad. I've seen it happen. That's what bein' a deck ape's about, and if we was as stupid as they think we be, we'd all be dead.

"Chief McCoy be the smahtest chief on this ship. So everyone thinks they be puttin' us down by callin' us deck apes, but we take it as a compliment, the othah divisions be damned."

Zack said, "The chief shuah talks funny. About the only time I can undahstand him is when he cusses."

"Then you aughta be able to undahstand him mosta the time."

They both laughed, and Eastman said, "Come on, I'll show ya the bridge."

THEY WALKED FORWARD past the ASROC launcher again and climbed up another ladder to the bridge, which was on the 02 level. They went around the side, and came to the starboard wing, which was an open extension of the bridge surrounded by a thick bulletproof steel shield about chest high. The forward part of it was called the break because it broke the force of large oncoming waves. In the middle was a tall, canvas covered pedestal. The deck was grated to drain water in rough seas.

Eastman said, "In poht, you'll have the duty every thihd day, which means ya can't leave the ship. The othah two days you can go ashowah, which is called libity, but we call it goin' 'on the beach.'

"Now this is the stahbahd bridge wing. You'll be standin' bridge watches while we be undahway. Fo' houahs on and eight houahs off. This is wheah

you'll stand as lookout. The ship is divided in half. Stahbahd lookout covahs everythin' fum the ships nose, which is zero degrees relative, to the fantail which is 180 degrees relative. Poht lookout covahs fum 180 degrees to 360 degrees, which is once again the ship's nose. You'll be issued a sound powehed phone and a paiah a binoculahs ta covah youah half. If you see a contact, which is any boat, owah ship, you call the bridge phone talkah and report the estimated range and bearing. A plane is called a bogey. Come on, let's go in."

They entered through a watertight door, and Zack took a good look around. He had been given an overview of the bridge in boot camp, but the reality of it was something else again. In each corner up by the bulletproof windows which covered the entire front, were two leather-covered comfortable looking chairs on pedestals: one for the Captain, and the other for the OOD. There was a large board in the middle at the rear with a ledge for colored grease pencils. In the center of it all was the ship's helm, and to its left was the "engine order telegraph," also known as the lee helm or the EOT.

The helm was about three-feet in diameter, made of solid brass and thickly banded in mahogany. The lee helm, also made of brass, was about four-feet high, and the top was shaped like a small drum lying sideways. The ends had levers and were marked for different speeds, forward and back: "Stop, Slow, Half, Full, and Flank." Below were three glass windows, each with a knob underneath, looking like the windows on a one armed bandit. In fact, Zack thought the whole thing looked like a two armed bandit.

A tall, portly sailor of about twenty-five, with a hawk nose and sharp, intelligent eyes, wearing a third class petty officer's chevron stenciled on his sleeve, came into the bridge through a door in the back. He was carrying a chart which he spread out on a large table in the rear corner of the port side.

Eastman said, "Quigley, meet my new deck ape, Mahtin. I'm showin' him about."

"You right out of boot camp?"

“Ayup.”

“Feel free to look around, any questions, just ask away. I suspect we’ll be seeing a lot of each other when we get underway. We stand watches with you deck apes. The Boats and I happen to be in the same watch section. I’m the ‘Quartermaster of the Watch’ and he’s the ‘Boatswain’s Mate of the Watch.’ ”

“Tell him a little about what you do, Quigley.”

“Well, we do all the navigating for the OOD. See this radar screen? We use it to take ‘fixes’ when we’re in range of land but still too far away to see it. We also keep the ‘Quartermaster’s Note Book.’ Every course and speed change goes in it. At the beginning and end of every watch, we record the ship’s longitude and latitude, and the OODs cherry pick it for their Ship’s Log entries. I will tell you, though, if we were as lacking in detail as they are, our chief’d tear us a new one.

“We use that,” he said pointing at the pedestal on the wing, “which is called a ‘Pelorus,’ to shoot visual bearings, which we...”

“That’s enough, Quig.” Turning to Martin, he said, “Once he gets stahted, he don’t always know when ta stop. This is wheah all the action is. Every decision is made right heah by the OOD who’s also called the Conning Officer: when to fight, what kind of ammo to use, what boilahs to put on line, wheah we be goin’ and how quick we need to get theyah.

“The best paht of it all is this,” he said, pointing at the helm. “I come on the Hawke off a little bitty lobster boat, and the fust time I was put on it, I thought I’d pass out fum joy. Theyah aint nothin’ like bein’ behind the wheel of a fo’-hunded foot ship of wah, cuttin’ through the waves at thihty-five knots. Nothin’ like it, anywheah. Sometimes I just can’t believe they pay me fo’ doin’ this job.”

Pointing at two gauges behind the helm, he said, “You got a compass in that binnacle theyah to steeah by, and this heah gauge indicates wheah youah ruddah is. I’m gonna fix it so you’ah in my watch section so I’ll be showin’ ya how. Palmer, the Gunnah’s Mate, is the best theyah is, but I ain’t so bad at it, if I do say so myself.

“This heah’s the lee helm. It’s the ship’s gas pedal. They have the same gauges set up in the engine room so’s the snipes know exactly what speeds the OOD wants. Just remembah, helm, and lee helm; when the OOD gives an odah, repeat it back to him, and say, ‘Aye, sir.’ If he says, ‘all ahead full, two-hundred tuhns for twenty-two knots,’ say it back loud and cleayah. Then you move both these levahs down to the full position, then down on the bottom heah, you tuhn the three dials ‘til they read two-hundred.

“Same on the helm. If he says, ‘Right hahd ruddah, come to couase Three-two-zero,’ what you gonna say, Mahtin?”

Zack said, “Right hahd ruddah, come to couase Three-two-zero, aye, sir!”

“Good, that’s how we do it. Theyah’s one othah thing. Phone talkah. He stands by the grease boahd, wearin’ sound powhed phones. He’s in communication with all the divisions on the ship, mainly the engine room, and CIC, which stands fo’ Combat Information Centah, owah the radah gang. They’ah just aft of us. They find and plot all known contacts. It’s like a bat cave in theyah. No lights except theyah grease boahd, and screens. Ya’d think if ya did youah twenty in theyah, ya’d come out with big white eyes like some kind of a cave crittah, but they do make good coffee, which reminds me, you’ll also stand as Messengah of the Watch. You’ll do the biddin’ of the Conning Officah, and keep my coffee cup filled at all times. I can tell ya now, ya won’t stand as phone talkah. They wouldn’t let me, eithah. Said no one could undahstand what I was sayin’. Go figyah?”

Quigley looked up from his chart, and snickered.

“Hey, Quig, ya think we should tell him about the Captain?”

“I don’t see why not. He’ll find out quick enough when he stands watches. ‘Forewarned is forearmed.’ The skipper is short of stature and tends to be aggressively....”

“Oh, come on now. The Captain’s a red-faced shrimp with a bad tempah!”

“I wouldn’t go so far as to say...”

“Us New Englandahs don’t beat about the bush like you pussy footin’ Midwesternahs, Quig. When his face is red that means he’s in his usual pissy mood but it can go all the way to puhple, and when it does, you bettah run. You can tell how mad he is by how deep his colah gets, just like ya can tell the tempatuah on a themometah. Anyone messes up, his head looks like a giant beet, and he skins ‘em alive.”

“Come on, you’re going to scare the boot, Boats.”

“Wasn’t it you who just said, ‘Fo’wahned is fo’ahmed?’ ”

“Well...”

“See that box ovah theyah,” said Eastman, pointing at a well constructed wooden box in the corner. “He’s so damn little, he has to stand on it to see ovah the bridge wing when we come in owah out of poht.”

Quigley said, “He runs a tight ship. If you just do your job, you’ll be okay. The deck apes aren’t usually the target of his wrath, so much as Quartermasters and junior officers are. But the saving grace is his wife. I’ve seen uglier women in Playboy centerfolds. She’s a blond goddess, and nearly a head taller than he is. His face only comes up to about her chest, which is another story altogether.”

Eastman laughed, and said, “She keeps him on a short leash, just like a dog.”

“She could keep me on a short leash any time, Boats. Just remember how it works. No matter how bad he beats us up at sea, every single weekend Captain Foley will find a way to be back in port. Hell, he’d probably sabotage the boilers if he had to. He might be the Captain of this ship, but she’s the Captain at home.”

Howell came on the bridge, and said, “The chief wants to see you both right now in the compartment.”

Eastman said, “We’ll be seein’ ya, Quig, let’s go, Mahtin.”

DOWN IN THE Deck Force compartment the chief sat in a swivel chair at a table. Both were bolted securely to the deck as much to keep them from

thrashing around in rough seas as to keep the apes from using them to settle personal scores. He was smoking a cigarette and drinking a cup of coffee. When Martin, Howell, and Eastman came in, he said, "The smokin' lamp's lit. Smoke 'em if yew got 'em." They sat down, took out packs of cigs and Zippo lighters, and lit up.

The chief pointed at a chart on the wall, and said, "This here be the 'Watch Quarter and Station Bill.' It has ever'one's name on it, and where they go fer ever' shipboard evolution: General Quarters, Replenishment at sea, yew name it. Memorize it, Martin. In the meantime, I've put yew down with Howell. He's been aboard long enough ta know where ta go, so yew jist tag along with him 'til yew figure it out.

"They's a General Quarters position in Mount fifty-two, the aft gun mount, that I think yew might be suited fer: the sight-setter. It sounds a lot more glamorous than what it is. Yew git crammed in a tiny space up forward of the breeches. Fire control gits the targets and does the vectorin'. The mount is connected ta them through the sight-setter's computer. The numbers come a flyin' inta yer dials, and yew have ta match 'em up with yer pointers. It happens in a flash and if yew mess it up, our own troops can be on the receivin' end of our shells. So I have ta know that yew be quick enough ta handle the job. Lives depend on it. Do yew know the slap game?"

"You mean slapsies, Chief?"

"Yup, and yew and me are gonta play right now, and I'll see if yew be fast enough ta do the work."

"No, Chief..."

"Gol dang it, Martin, did yew jist say no ta me? No one on this whole damn ship says no ta me! When I say jump, yew say how high! We'll do rock, paper, scissors ta see who starts on the bottom."

The chief threw out a fist, and Zack threw five fingers. The chief said, "Paper covers rock. Yew start, Martin." Zack thought he saw a look of malignant glee in the chief's eyes. Howell and Eastman watched intently.

Zack and the chief stood and squared off. Zack put out both hands, palms up, and then McCoy put his hands face down on Zack's lightly. Zack feigned with a quick upward pressure, and the chief swiftly moved his hands out of harm's way. They settled into place again. This time Zack turned his right hand over and tried to slap the chief's left. His heart wasn't in it, though, and the chief once again rapidly moved his hands away, and Zack missed. The chief gave his little evil half-smile, and said, "My turn."

The chief didn't mess around. They had no sooner settled their hands when the chief struck like lightning and smashed his hand hard. Ouch, Zack said to himself, it's like getting hit with a brick! The Chief struck again for the next four rounds, and said, "That's all yew got, Yankee Boy?"

That did it. Zack was tired of being mocked, and he knew what the chief was going to do. He had his moves down, so the minute his hands settled he swiftly pulled them back, and the chief's whistled through empty air.

My turn now, Zack thought grimly. The chief wasn't ready when Zack stung him with his farmer's hand in a hard cross slap. The next one was a double, and the sound of it was loud. The chief's smile faded and something else crossed his face, and it wasn't pleasant. Zack didn't care. He was slow to anger, but slow to cool, and right now, he was hot.

The chief wouldn't call it. He wanted to even the score, but he had become defensive. When he'd put his palms down, Zack would twitch ever so slightly, and the chief would pull away. When he finally settled, Zack would nail him and other times he'd smack him before his hold fast, held fast. After losing about fifteen painful rounds, the chief finally faced the inevitability of defeat, and threw in the towel saying, "Okay, Martin, I reckon yew be quick enough ta set sights. Dadgumit, yew little chikin fucker..." This time his smile reached his eyes. In the space of a very few moments the Rebel and the Yankee had bridged the Mason-Dixon Line and forged a mutual respect.

"No hard feelin's," the chief said as he extended a rapidly swelling red hand to shake. As they shook, Zack thought glumly, that's great, I've just been promoted from Yankee boy to chikin fucker.

COMMANDER WILLIAM P. FOLEY, Commanding Officer or “Captain” of the *Hawke*, was in a bad mood. This wasn’t unusual, but today he actually had a pretty good reason for being so grumpy. Not only was his ship a third short of full compliment, but about a quarter of his men were fresh out of boot camp. He was a practical man who had paid heavy dues as a Weapons Officer in Korea. Many times he had traded fire with Communist troops, and although his destroyer was hit on several occasions, he sent those bastards straight to hell. He was all too familiar with the realities of coastal warfare, and he knew only too well what Vietnam held in store for them.

He also knew the *Hawke*’s shallow draft of fourteen-feet coupled with the five-and-a-half mile effective range of her guns, would require him to hug the shores and follow the rivers inland to acquire targets and, of course, the closer to land, the greater the chances of Communist retaliation. The secret to success and survival during these missions was speed and accuracy.

The only way to beat the odds was to have a topnotch ship and crew. Nothing less than first rate performance from all Departments, especially Weapons and Engineering, was acceptable. His crew might be inexperienced, but he had learned long ago that the key to effective training was repetition. Drill ‘em until they can’t stand, and then drill ‘em some more. When my crew can function efficiently at their General Quarters stations without sleep for forty-eight hours, he thought, we’ll be ready. It’s time to go to sea and turn-to. And they did. The *Hawke* cast off her lines and headed out of San Diego Harbor steaming north along California’s rocky coast toward the Navy’s firing range on San Miguel Island.

AFTER THE DECK APES had secured from the Special Sea Detail, a tall, tough looking sailor, with a fu-manchu mustache, popped into the First Division compartment and bellowed, “Which one a you’s Martin?”

His greasy sleeves were rolled up, and his arms were as heavily inked as the Boatswain’s Mates, and like Chief McCoy, the fingers on both of his fists had been tattooed with the words “Hold Fast.”

“I am.”

“Come.”

They went aft to Gun Mount fifty-two.

He glared at Zack, and said, “I’m Palmer. Mount fifty-two is my personal property. I own it. Slocum’s the Mount Captain and he might run the crew, but I run the guns, and don’t you ever forget it.”

“I won’t,” Zack said a little nervously, and thought, this guy looks like he’s around thirty-five. How can he be this old and still only be a third class petty officer?

What he didn’t know was that Palmer loved to drink and he loved to fight. His favorite targets were Marines and the Shore Patrol. They strutted around like they were the baddest of the bad or so they thought until they met Palmer, who liked nothing more than getting drunk, and beating the crap out of them singly or in packs. It was only during these encounters that he ever smiled, and the worse the odds, the happier he became. In the bars he was like a pit bull off his chain and had been brought back to the ship in handcuffs and leg-irons more times than he could remember.

The only reason he hadn’t been thrown out of the Navy was because no one, not even his chief, knew the intricacies of every single weapon onboard the Hawke as well as he did. He had been up and down through the ranks more times than a yo-yo in a Chinese tournament.

“Get up here,” he growled, climbing a set of steel loops welded onto the side of the mount and entering through a small water-tight door.

Zack followed him in. He had gotten used to the sight of the enormous gun barrels, but inside the size and scope of their breeches was overwhelming.

Palmer saw the expression on Zack’s face and said with pride, “They’re really somethin’, aren’t they? Each of ‘em weighs a little more than two tons, and if you don’t know what you’re doin’, they can mess you up real good, so pay attention, boot. You’re goin’ to be settin’ sights, but everyone has to know how to load powder and projectiles. It’s a fast, dangerous business. Many a man’s been careless or slow, and lost fingers and hands to these guns,

so you might be called on to replace an injured crewman. You ever fire a semi-automatic rifle?"

Zack nodded yes.

"These babies work pretty much the same but we have to manually load 'em. When they're fired, the recoil opens the breech back up, and kicks out the spent brass powder cases. Each gun has a 'powder man,' a 'projectile man' and a 'hot case man' wearin' your mom's oven mitts who catches the smokin' hot brass as soon as it comes flyin' out, then tosses it through that hatch down there onto the main deck and out of our way.

"The powder man takes the powder case out of this here delivery tube. They'll be about thirty inches long or knee high. He takes off the primer protector and checks to be sure the rammer is all the way back. If he doesn't check it and it isn't back, when he throws the powder, it'll bounce off the top and roll down to the deck. If it should land on the primer it'll blow us all to smithereens, so you better check careful-like if you want to stay alive. If the rammer IS back, he puts the casin' in the rear of the breech, clears his hands and arms, and gets ready to load again.

"The projectile man takes the forty-five pound projectile out of this here hoist and places it in front of the powder. He makes sure the powder man is clear, and pulls down this lever which pushes the whole ball of wax up into the chamber IN ONE SECOND, BOOT! Any appendages get in the way, they're gone real quick! You better believe the shit WILL hit the fan and endanger our mission. And don't you ever get behind these guns when we're firin'. They have a fifteen-inch recoil, and can knock you on your ass if they don't just kill you.

"There are three commands that Slocum'll give: 'Load' which means we're gonna fire one at a time, 'Rapid' which means we're gonna be firin' just as fast as we can and 'Cease Fire' which should require no explanation even to a dumb-ass boot like you.

"We fire three types of ammo. White Phosphorous which is also known as 'Willy Peter.' It's the nastiest shit on the planet. It burns at over

five-thousand degrees Fahrenheit and there is no way to put it out. Not water, not anythin'. It burns clean through everythin' it touches. Then there's AAC which is an all purpose 'frag' or fragmentation round. And we sometimes fire Star Shells which are used for night illumination. They're loaded with a weak charge of Willy Peter and come down slow on parachutes.

"Now move your ass way up into the space between the guns and find the two bicycle seats. Sit on the one that's all the way forward. See those three dials and the two hand cranks on the computer? Good. We'll be locked into fire control, so those central dials are gonna spin like crazy. All you have to do is use those two hand cranks there, and match up the index marks on your outer dial to the lines on fire control's central disc. It sounds easier than it is. It's about like pattin' your head and rubbin' your stomach at the same time, but you gotta be quick and Chief McCoy seems to think you're quick enough....Any questions?"

"No, sir."

"Slocum says you come off a farm somewhere in the boonies up north. Farmers make the best gunners and boatswains. Guys like us been around machinery all our lives. Guns and tackle ain't a whole lot different than farm equipment. They can make our lives easier, or kill us quick if we get careless. You did all right here today, Martin. You kept your mouth shut and your eyes and ears open. That's what all dumb-ass boots should do. Now get outta my mount. I've wasted enough time on you."

UP ON THE BRIDGE the Quartermasters were in their element. It was laid back, easy navigating with the ship steaming north about eight miles off the coast. The OOD had them set a course and speed to arrive at the firing range at 1400, and they were right on time. The Captain was in his chair taking everything in. Zack was port lookout and Howell was on the starboard wing. The day was blue, warm and sunny with the ship making its own cooling breeze as the Hawke cut smoothly through the rolling swells. Quigley kept a watchful eye on his radar screen and when they were twenty

miles from their destination, he notified the OOD. The Captain, of course, overheard and said, "Call out General Quarters, Mr. Moretti."

The OOD turned to Eastman and said, "Boats?"

Eastman piped out the order over the PA system and announced, "General Quatahs, General Quatahs, all hands man youah battle stations!" This was followed by a loud klaxon, and the ship's crew exploded into action.

After being relieved, Zack hustled aft to the mount, climbed in and scurried up into his cubby hole. He donned sound-powered phones and heard Slocum tell fire control, "Mount fifty-two manned and ready," and suddenly the turret started rotating back and forth, while its guns began moving up and down. Zack could feel the Hawke zigzagging as she gained speed. His dials were spinning wildly. Palmer tapped him on the shoulder, leaned over, pulled a headphone away from his ear, and said, "Get on it, boot. You ain't playin' Slapsies with the chief nomore."

Zack furiously chased fire control's marks around and around, and the mount began to steady. It still swiveled, and the barrels kept raising and lowering, but his computer was compensating for the ship's motion. Even though the destroyer rolled and pitched, her guns remained relentlessly on target. And it was deafening in there. The motors ground noisily, changing pitch with every movement, and the sickening smell of old oil was thick enough to cut with a knife. Then Zack heard, "Fire when ready."

Slocum hollered, "Rapid!" and all hell broke loose. The guns opened up and were louder than anything Zack had ever heard before. Louder than thunder. Zack not only heard the booming cracks in his ears, but could actually feel the sounds in every bone in his body. He kept chasing the swiftly moving and ever changing marks with his cranks, and they kept firing for what seemed like forever.

At long last Slocum gave the order, "Cease fire!"

There was a thin layer of smoke swirling around, and the powder and projectiles had their own unique acrid smell. The foul air burned Zack's

eyes and throat; his stomach was flopping. Gotta get control, he frantically thought to himself.

The bright California sun beat down upon them without mercy, and the breeches were now hot. The temperature inside kept climbing, and gave no indication it would ever stop. The gun crew was soaked and dripping with sweat. They fired intermittently throughout the afternoon and the odor of their perspiring bodies blended into the corrosive stench of the mount.

Zack heard Slocum say over the phone, "Fire control, ask the OOD for permission ta cross-train." A few minutes later the reply came: "Mount fifty-two, Permission granted."

Palmer took Zack out of his hole and replaced him with Schmidt, the bulky six-foot plus projectile man. It was almost comical watching him try to squeeze into the tight sight setter's space. After giving Schmidt several minutes of instructions, Palmer turned around and said, "Okay, Martin. You're projectile man on the starboard gun. Any questions? No? Okay, just don't drop any rounds. If you blow us all up, I'll have to kill you. Everyone ready?"

He gave a nod to Slocum, who shouted, "Rapid!"

The powder man loaded the brass casing into the back of the breech. Zack carefully took the projectile out of the hoist and placed it in front of the powder, looked back to make sure all was clear and pulled the rammer lever down. The shell loaded so quickly it looked like it disappeared.

Slocum fired the rounds and Palmer hollered, "Come on you scrawny maggot, move it, MOVE IT!"

The shells weighed about as much as green bales of hay and Zack had thrown thousands, maybe tens-of-thousands of them on conveyors into the barn. This wasn't a whole lot different. Just have to get in the rhythm, and with sweat running from every pore in his body, he did. Instead of loading a hay conveyor, he thought, I'm loading a conveyor of death.

They fired for about an hour, and Palmer whispered to Slocum, "That skinny little bastard sure can load."

Slocum whispered back, "He sure as hell can. I clocked him at sixteen rounds a minute."

Palmer said quietly, "Never underestimate the power of a farm boy, Boats."

"Yew got that right, Guns."

THE CAPTAIN continuously whipped his crew, one drill after another. Sometimes he'd secure from GQ, and then call it again five minutes later. But like Quigley and Eastman said, on Fridays the ship always returned to San Diego and the Old Man's drop-dead gorgeous wife was always waiting on the pier to welcome him home.

IN PORT, after lights were out, Zack had trouble sleeping. The air in the compartment was stifling and foul from the lack of circulation and the smell of sleeping men's bodies. He climbed out of his rack, put on his dungarees, grabbed a pack of cigarettes and his Zippo, and went topside. He walked up the port side, stopped at the forward break and lit up a smoke. Awhile later a snipe who was also unable to sleep came out of a nearby watertight door. The name stenciled on his shirt was Mueller. He took a careful look at Zack's and asked, "How're you doing, Martin?"

"Okay, Muellah."

Like all snipes, he was grimy from constant exposure to soot. Underneath that, he was pale from lack of sunlight, and his arms and face were covered with scratches, a scattering of pimples, and nasty looking burns.

He looked at Zack's deep tan and said, "I take it you're a deck ape?"

"Ayup."

"Where you from?"

"Vamont, and you?"

"Eastern Oregon."

"What do youah folks do?"

“We’re farmers. Where I come from it’s all dry, brown desert, but when we irrigate it, everything grows just fine. What about your family?”

“We fahm too, but watah ain’t a poblehm fo’ us. You like bein’ a snipe?”

“Are you kidding me? I hate it. I was an ape before this, but I got screwed over big time. I’m in the reserves and they sent me here for my two years active duty. When I reported aboard, the Deck Force had all the hands they needed, so they gave me to the snipes. I’m trying to get out, but it looks like I’m stuck here for good. Man, it sucks! You topside guys don’t know how bad it is in the boilers. The Captain’s always messing with us. Even our Engineering Officer hates his guts.”

“Hey, we don’t get off the hook, eithah. It seems like we spend twenty-fo’ houahs a day at GQ. Why do you guys hate him so bad?”

“If you were one of us you would, too. Listen, every two or three weeks the tubes in the boilers get covered with soot and scale, which cuts the ship’s speed by maybe a knot. It’s our job to clean ‘em out. But waiting until they’re dirty isn’t good enough for Captain Foley, no sir. So every damn week when we’re out at sea, he takes one off-line, and we have to crawl in with flashlights, scrapers, and wire brushes, and scour ‘em ‘till the bare iron shines. The bastard wants those tubes spotless, but he really doesn’t want them shut down either, so he makes us go in while they’re still hotter than hell. It’s real cramped in there, and all you gotta do is touch the sides anywhere, and you get the crap burned outta yourself. Look,” he said holding out his arms, “I’ve got burns all over. Believe me, I’d take the Deck Force over the boilers any day of the week.”

They talked a bit more and before they returned to their compartments, Mueller said, “Come on back tomorrow night if you can.”

“Ayup, will do,” said Zack, and he did. An unlikely alliance was formed: deck ape and snipe. The two divisions occupied two different worlds and rarely came into contact with each other.

A FEW NIGHTS later as Martin and Mueller were smoking and shooting the breeze, Howell and Kearns drifted up from the compartment. They had

much in common: Howell's family grew soybeans in Minnesota and Kearns' family raised cattle in Kansas. The newcomers listened in horror to Mueller's tale of woe about being shanghaied into the boilers. Howell spoke for them all when he said, "As far as we're concerned, you're no snipe. Once a deck ape, always a deck ape, right guys?" Everyone heartily agreed. These meetings became a nightly event and they all became fast friends.

DURING ONE OF their evening bull sessions, Zack asked the others, "How come Ensign Wells seems scared of the chief?" Kearns and Howell cracked up.

"What's so funny?" Zack asked.

After they stopped laughing, Howell looked over at Kearns and said, "I'll tell it." Kearns shrugged, and Howell continued, "When Dixon came aboard I overheard him ask Slocum the exact same question. Slocum told him that Wells came here straight from college and the Reserve Officers Training Corps, or ROTC. One day he's 'Joe College' and the next he's an officer on a ship of war. He didn't know the forecastle from the fantail, but he still strutted around First Division like he was an admiral instead of just a piss-ant ensign. Then he started pushing the chief around and treating him like he was stupid. You been on the ship long enough to know it's a real bad idea to give the chief any crap. Even the Captain treats him with respect.

"So, one morning after Quarters, Wells started giving him a bunch of guff and Chief McCoy cuts him off, just shuts him up. He got right in Wells' face and told him," and Howell continued his story in an excellent imitation of the chief's voice and accent, "Lookie here, yew, I've had enough a yer stupid shit. I been in this man's Navy fer close on ta thirty years, and I know more about yer job than yew'll ever learn in yer lifetime, and yew sure as hell cain't learn nothin' when yer always flappin' yer gums. Yer greener than a Leprechaun's ass, and yew need to shet yer mouth and start payin' right good attention ta what's goin' on around yew. Yer four years in yer fancy-ass college ain't taught yew a damn thing about how a ship works or fights. I've

trained plenty a good officers standin' right where yer standin' now but most had enough sense ta shet up and learn. So from here on out I'm gonta tell yew how it's gonta be: yew jist button yer lips and let me do yer job fer ya 'til ye've learned enough ta do it yer own damn self.

"Slocum said Wells turned so red he thought he was gonna explode. He started to say something, thought twice about it, shut his mouth, turned around and walked away. We sure haven't seen much of him since.

"Slocum never heard an enlisted man ever get away with telling off an officer like that. He was in shock. The chief saw the look on his face, laughed, and said, 'don't yew go worryin' about it none, Darnell. Nobody'll believe that little chikin fucker, even if he has the balls ta take it ta someone, and I got fifty bucks, says he don't."

Zack said, "I knew it! I was right all along, Wells is a green-ass boot!" and they all whooped with laughter.

ZACK AND THE CREW knew it was only a matter of days before the ship would receive deployment orders, so he requested permission to go on the pier to use the pay phone. Unfortunately he wasn't the only sailor with this thought in mind. The line was endless and it was 2100 before it was finally his turn. First, he used his pile of change to call home and briefly say good bye to his family.

Then he called Tally. "Hello, Mrs. Goodwin. It's Zack. Is Tally theyah?"

There was a pause. "I'll get her. It's pretty late here, she's asleep."

Zack was relieved that Mrs. Goodwin answered the phone, because he doubted Mr. Goodwin would have gotten her up.

"Hello, is that really you, Zack?"

"Ayup, how ah you, Tally?" They were a little awkward. Coast to coast phone calls were quite expensive and not very common.

"I'm fine, Zack, how are you?"

"I'm okay. We'ah gettin' ready to go ovahseas any time now. It's so good just to heah youah voice."

“It’s good to hear your voice too, Zack. I miss you so much.”

A voice cut in, “Please deposit one dollar and seventy-five cents for another three minutes.”

There were the sounds of a bell as the phone ate all but his last quarter.

“I’ll write you, Zack.” She paused, and then in a whisper said, “I’ll wait for you, Zack. I’ll be here for you. I can’t talk too loud, but I’ll never forget the time we spent together when you came back home on leave.”

“I know what you mean. Neithah will I, Tally, and I’ll wait fo’ you, too.”

“Write to me, Zack, and stay safe and come home to me.”

“I will, Tally, I will. I love you.”

“I love you too, Zack.”

“Good night, Tally.”

“Good night, Zack.”

They hung up just as the operator demanded more change.

WHEN THE DAY came that the Captain was satisfied with his crew’s performance, he thought to himself, it’s not a minute too soon. It’s time for this ship to go to war.



CHAPTER 2

THE HAWKE'S CREW had been up since the crack of dawn readying the ship for the long anticipated voyage to join the Seventh Fleet. The Navy divided the world up into ten sections or "Fleets" and the seventh was called "WesPac" because it encompassed the Western Pacific Ocean. Vietnam fell within the Seventh Fleet's purview and its Commanding Officer, Admiral Paul Blackburn, was in charge of the Naval War there. Destroyers under his authority were used to guard aircraft carriers while they launched airstrikes, to support amphibious landings, to provide gunfire, and to engage in reconnaissance and patrols.

THERE WERE SIX mooring lines securing the ship to the pier, and Zack and Howell's Special Sea Detail station was on the forecastle where the bow-line and aft spring-line were located. Each of the six were doubled up for strength and lashed together or "frapped" with heavy twine. They had "Rat Guards" tied onto them about half way down to the dock. Of course someone had to climb out and undo it all prior to getting underway; someone on the bottom of the deck ape's pecking order.

RAT GUARDS were used to keep vermin off the vessels. They were galvanized discs, about five feet in diameter that came apart in two sections. The face was slightly conical and the concave side always pointed shoreward, making it nearly impossible for the would-be stowaways to scramble over them.

From both the rats and apes point of view the guards were a major nuisance. The rats were miniature illegal immigrants that were constantly trying to sneak across the border, or in this case, the barrier. They knew there was a better life waiting for them onboard if they could only jump or climb a little higher, and the guards prevented them from achieving their dreams of a fatter future.

The apes didn't like them because straddling and unfrapping the swaying lines was difficult enough as it was, and the guards were heavy and cumbersome and once untied, hard to lug along. Sometimes, when an ape lost his balance, it would become necessary to drop one in the water to keep from going in himself. When that occurred, Chief McCoy would be ready and waiting to upbraid the offender with one of his colorful, farm animal illustrated tongue-lashings.

THE CHIEF sent Howell and Zack out to strip the lines. Each was given a bulky life jacket for safety should they accidentally fall. And when an ape or rat guard did take the plunge, it provided a great source of amusement to those who witnessed the event.

THE PIER was overflowing with wives, sweethearts and family members; the prevailing mood was far from jubilant. Everyone wore their best faces, but there would be a lot of tears shed before the day was over.

All the men were at their stations. The Captain, standing on his custom-made wooden box, bellowed an order which in turn was relayed via sound-powered phone: "Single up all lines!" The Boatswain's Mates relayed the order to their crews, and the deck apes quickly hauled the extra

lines in. That was the Captain's last order while getting underway. Now it was the OOD's show.

Up on the bridge the OOD ordered, "Cast off all spring-lines," and he looked down from the bridge wing as his command was repeated and carried out. When that had been done he ordered, "Let go the stern-line, rudder amidships, port engine back slow," and the prop wash pushed the destroyer's stern away from the pier. As the *Hawke* started to slowly move backwards into the turning basin, he ordered, "Let go the bow-line," and the wives and relatives waved madly as the *Hawke's* last connection to the San Diego Naval Base and America was broken. With that accomplished, the crew, dazzling in their dress white uniforms, manned the rails at parade rest and the crowd went crazy.

Like all the military, since the beginning of our nation, they had absolutely no doubt the war to which their leaders were sending them was justified and necessary.

As the ship coasted backwards the OOD watched the bow. When it was clear of the pier, he ordered, "Port engine back slow, right full rudder," and the *Hawke* swung until her bow was headed down the main ship channel. "All stop. Rudder amidships." And a second later, "Both engines ahead slow. Make turns for five knots."

The Captain, still on his box, was well pleased. Lieutenant Moretti had done his job precisely right and had shown no nerves whatsoever with the crowd on the pier and his new Captain watching intently. Captain Foley offered no compliments. Precisely right was what he expected of any of his officers and enlisted men.

ON HIS WAY back to the compartment to change into dungarees and a blue baseball cap for his watch, Zack couldn't quite believe that he was actually about to cross the entire Pacific Ocean. Before I joined the Navy, he thought, I never even crossed New England.

ZACK MARTIN had been raised on a small, generational dairy farm in an area known as “The Northeast Kingdom.” The “Kingdom” as it was commonly called, encompasses three counties in the very northeastern corner of Vermont. In a state with the second smallest population in America, it’s a place known for its vast, rugged forests, poverty and punishing winters. It’s mostly inhabited by self-reliant, hard-headed loggers and farmers. The only easily raised crops to be found in this part of the country are trees and rocks. Now it wasn’t that Zack didn’t like farming or his home, it’s just that he wanted to do more and to see more before he settled down. He believed those posters: “Join the Navy, see the world.”

In his junior year he had actually wanted to become a Marine. He skipped school and had a friend drive him down to St. Johnsbury. The recruiter there was as full of crap as they all are and like the rest, he had to make his monthly quota or get whisked off to this new place called Vietnam. He saw Zack coming a mile away. Dumb-assed hayseed hick-farm kids were the easiest marks. Paint them a picture of battlefield gallantry and it worked every time, not that he knew what any of that stuff was about. The closest he’d ever been to a battlefield was the “Combat Zone,” or the red light district in Boston. His disappointment was crushing when he realized his target was only seventeen and needed his parent’s consent.

When Zack asked his dad, usually a calm man, to sign his enlistment papers, he went ballistic. He’d been in the infantry in World War Two, and knew there was no such thing as gallantry on the battlefield: just a lot of bloody death, pain, suffering, broken and dismembered bodies. He wanted to get his hands around that jarhead recruiter’s throat, and choke the living hell out of him. But, he also knew it was likely, in the near future, Zack would be drafted into the Army, so they both compromised and Zack joined the Navy.

ZACK THOUGHT, Wow! Four months ago I was in high school and now I’m getting ready to stand watch on a destroyer’s bridge. It doesn’t get any better than this!



CHAPTER 3

AS THE HAWKE steamed toward Hawaii, she was accompanied by the heavy cruiser Providence, and the destroyers Halsey, Higbee, and Black. During the years to come, the Hawke would be assigned many missions with these new friends.

Most of the journey was done at a leisurely seventeen to twenty knots but even at those speeds, the twenty-five-hundred miles from San Diego to Pearl Harbor would soon be covered quickly enough.

The weather was mild and warm, and of course, getting warmer as the voyage progressed in a southerly direction. The crews were kept busy scraping and painting. The boatswains weren't working the troops too hard but like Baptists, they did believe that "Idle hands are the devil's playthings."

During the Hawke's pre-deployment training, all of the supplies and fuel needed had been brought onboard from piers. Now that the ship was traversing the Pacific, that was no longer a possibility.

Destroyers are lean ships by necessity and design. Their missions require them to move fast and hit hard. They don't need a lot of excess weight to

slow them down because history has shown that a slow destroyer is a dead destroyer. Their lack of storage did, however, have a downside. It required them to go alongside whatever ships could spare them food, fuel, or ammunition and this might happen as often as three or more times a week.

In the ideal world, they would rendezvous with Reefers for food and Oilers for fuel. When out on extended firing missions, projectiles and powder would have to be brought to them by ammo ships. When none of these were available, any larger vessels operating nearby, such as cruisers or carriers, were fair game and destroyers would come a begging.

And so, midway between San Diego and Hawaii, the Hawke found herself getting low on food and fuel and, like a good neighbor, the Providence had plenty to spare and was willing to share.

The high-pitched trill of the boatswain's pipe called the crew to, "Set the Underway Refueling and Replenishment Detail," or "UNREP." Zack's station was amidships on the 01 deck with the "Highline Detail" and was responsible for bringing supplies onboard. There were two other stations set up fore and aft to take on fuel. Zack hastily returned his scraper and wire brush to the boatswain's locker in the forecabin and then hustled on up to report to Dixon on the ASROC deck.

After climbing the ladder he was issued a lifejacket and a blue hardhat which identified him as a line handler. Colored hardhats were used to tell apart the various types of workers on the host and receiving ships. As the Highline Captain, Dixon's was yellow.

Zack saw that the riggers had already taken down the lifeline on the starboard side and bolted a large steel tripod with a twelve-inch snatch block fastened to it, onto the roof of the chopper hanger. The deck apes had been prepped on what was expected of them and they waited patiently as the Hawke put on speed and began closing with the Providence.

The cruiser was by now no more than a few miles off, steaming into the wind on a prearranged course and speed of twelve knots. The ship was nearly twice as long as the Hawke and had the same sleek, lethal lines. Zack

thought it looked like a huge destroyer. With two enormous twin rocket launchers on the fantail and a couple of triple eight-inch gun turrets on the forecastle, the Providence had some real serious firepower, as the Viet Cong would soon find out.

THE HAWKE made her approach quickly and then backed down to match the cruiser's speed. It appeared as if they were both within spitting distance, but in reality they were about eighty feet apart. Eighty feet may seem far but it's wicked close, close enough for a lot of bad things to happen, and from time to time bad things did happen. Lines parted, limbs were lost, men washed overboard in heavy seas, blows to the head and body from swinging loads, just to mention a few, and that eighty feet can become a lot closer real quick. As two ships come alongside each other, hydrodynamic forces increase and change the ship's handling noticeably. At twelve knots, one degree off course will move a ship twenty feet sideways, four degrees and you have a collision. That's why Palmer, at the wheel today, was doing everything within his power to keep the Hawke precisely where she needed to be. To the untrained eye, it appeared he was at war with the helm. No slow gentle moves here. Eyes glued to the binnacle, he flung the wheel this way and that, never being still for a moment, for a second. Palmer held down many highly skilled jobs on the destroyer and knew lives depended on his ability to perform them flawlessly. He took his work seriously and never gave less than one-hundred percent of his concentration to any assigned tasks.

AFTER THE HAWKE steadied alongside, Zack watched the raging water between the two ships and thought it looked worse than the Connecticut River in full spring flood. Pointing down, he said to Howell, "Life jackets or not, you wouldn't last long in theyah."

His friend replied, "No, you wouldn't. Keep your eyes and ears open,

Martin. Sometimes big waves will wash over the deck. Anyone falls in now, they're dead meat. If the screws don't chew you up, the sharks that been following us from San Diego sure will."

ZACK AND HOWELL saw a round, roly-poly figure dressed in red on the Providence. Red ID'd him as a Gunner's Mate, and he looked like a rifle toting Quasimodo. As the ships got closer the apes realized his appearance was distorted because he was wearing a nylon jersey stretched tightly over a bulbous kapok life jacket. Dixon hollered for his men to take cover while the man in red shouldered his gun and fired their way.

Instead of a bullet, he shot a cylindrical rod that was attached to a coil of thin nylon cord. Dixon swiftly grabbed it and ran the cord through a block. When the Gunner's Mate saw that the Hawke's apes had their end secured, he tied three lines to it and then signaled Dixon's riggers to pull it aboard.

The first line was a tape measure of sorts. It was marked at twenty foot intervals with colored flags for daylight, and red lights for nighttime. The zero began on the Providence, and three deck apes were assigned to keep it taut. When it was in place, the Captain or OOD could take a quick look off the bridge wing and see exactly how close the ship was to collision.

The second line contained a sound-powered phone cord. Once it was secured, communications were established bridge to bridge and station to station.

The third line was called "The Messenger" which had a succession of progressively heavier lines attached to it until finally a three inch or sometimes a five-inch manila hawser was hauled onboard that had a trolley connected to it. This was the "Highline" and it was threaded through the snatch block on the tripod. Provisions would then be attached to the trolley. In cases of extreme weather or heavy loads, wire cable could be substituted for the manila.

Each ship had a set of line handlers to move the trolley back and forth and another crew was necessary to keep the slack out of the Highline.

In most cases a winch was used for the latter, but when personnel were transferred ship to ship via “Boatswain’s Chair,” the winch was never used.

Zack’s job, along with twenty-five or so other sailors, was to heave the supplies over which consisted primarily of food and an assortment of machine parts. More importantly, it also included their mail, which had usually been transferred many times prior to reaching its final destination. Unfortunately, mail bearing ships were often diverted to other missions before they could make their deliveries and off they’d go with their precious cargo. It was not uncommon for it to take more than a month for correspondence to reach its recipients, nor was it uncommon for newer correspondence to arrive long before the old. Many a sailor kept getting happy notes from their wives and girl friends long after they had already received and read “Dear John Letters.”

ONCE THIRTY-FIVE pallets of machinery and chow had been sent over to the Hawke, the cruiser apes stuffed a chief wearing a bulging life jacket onto the small seat of a cramped metal cage-like contraption that looked like a medieval torture device. This was the infamous “Boatswain’s Chair.” Those who have ridden in one will never forget the experience, especially if it was in bad seas. When the chief was securely strapped in and the shackle connecting the chair to the trolley was closely inspected, the phone talker passed the word to go. Dixon bellowed at his Highline tenders to “Get the slack out!” and then turned and bellowed at Zack and his gang, “Pull, God damn you! Put your backs into it now!” and the chair and the chief slowly began a wild, wobbly ride toward the Hawke. After the riggers steadied, secured and extracted the chief, the UNREP mission was complete and it was time to disengage the three stations. Since the equipment was normally supplied by the provider ship, it was returned in reverse order. From the Hawke’s point of view, the lines kept getting smaller and smaller as they were fed back to the cruiser.

Zack was fascinated by the rigging, and he intuitively understood how it all worked. He thought it was a lot like farming where one had to “make

do” to get a job done. Like Zack, many of the Deck Force’s petty officers were raised on rural farms, and their childhood experiences had given them the basic mechanical creativity to accomplish any given task using only what they had onboard. The boatswains were always looking for talent, and they recognized Zack as one of their own. They kept a close watch on him and thought he had the potential to join their elite little group.

After the gear was recovered by the Providence, the OOD ordered, “All ahead flank,” which was a speed of about thirty-five knots, to “Break away.” When the Hawke pulled ahead of the cruiser, she loudly played the “William Tell Overture” over the PA system. This was her trademark, and it was played every time the destroyer finished UNREP.

Zack headed to the boatswains locker to pick up his tools so he could turn-to. He still had a couple of hours before going on watch.



CHAPTER 4

THE HAWKE'S RADAR showed land, and the lookouts confirmed it: Diamond Head, Oahu, Hawaii. Shortly after, the Captain set the Special Sea Detail, and the crew busily got ready to enter port.

The deck apes stood at parade rest in their tropical white uniforms under the five-inch gun mount on the forecastle as the Hawke cautiously worked her way through Pearl Harbor's bottleneck entrance. To Zack and the other topside sailors it looked more like a long, jungle-lined river than a harbor. Scattered about were rusted, twisted hulks that had once been ships, planes, and boats. Many of the larger ones had been blasted and dragged to the sides of the main channel. These were relics that bore silent witness to the most lethal attack ever launched on American soil.

Chief McCoy noticed the awed looks on his sailors' faces as they traveled down the narrow waterway so rich in history. It's one thing to learn about Pearl Harbor from books, and quite another to behold the actual remnants of the battle's destruction a mere twenty four years later.

Time ta give the troops a little history lesson, thought the chief to himself.

“Listen up,” he said, “Fer those a yew who ain’t heered, destroyers’re always named fer Navy heroes, and this ship ain’t no different. Eli Hawke was a brand new ensign who come up through the ranks as a boatswain. He was on the cruiser USS Greenville stationed here in Pearl when them Japanese Zeros come outta the sun and started droppin’ bombs all over. Men was screamin’, dyin’, and tryin’ ta git organized ta fight back. The base was burnin’, planes was gittin’ shot down, and ships was gittin’ blowed up and sinkin’ right at their piers. Hawke and a commander kept their heads, and somehow made their way up ta the bridge.

“As soon as they got up there, an enemy bomb hit the forward mount and blowed it ta Kingdom Come. They was shrapnel flyin’ everywhere and the commander was killed on the spot. Hawke was hit bad too, but he took charge, and him and a handful of snipes got that big cruiser underway. He took the helm his own self, bleedin’ the whole time, and swung her out inta this same twisty channel we be in right now. He got his ship safe out ta sea but he lost too much blood doin’ it. Never made it off the bridge alive, died right there. The corpsman said he couldn’t see how he done it wounded bad as he was, but Hawke was one a the best a us. He knew what had ta be done, and he knew he was the only one could do it, so with his last breath and his last drop a blood he saved his ship.”

Looking directly at Zack and then Eastman, he continued, “He done right good fer a Yankee, but don’t fergit: that boy was a boatswain through and through. Let this be a lesson ta yew all. When yer at war, there ain’t nothin’ in this world more important than doin’ yer job and doin’ yer duty. Doin’ yer duty jist means doin’ yer job when everthin’s gone ta hell around yew. Only two things matter in combat: killin’ yer enemy and keepin’ yer ship afloat.

“So if things go hard, if things go against us, yew remember Ensign Eli Hawke. Focus yer mind on yer task, and fergit everthin’ else. That’s how he done it.”

Brandishing his tattooed fists at his apes, he said, “Hold Fast to what yer doin’ and if we come under fire remember: it be quicker ta take yer time and git yer job done right the first time than mess it up by tryin’ ta git it done too damn fast and havin’ ta do it twice.”

He paused for a minute to let his words sink in, then said, “While we be on the subject a Eli Hawke, it be an honor ta serve on a ship named fer sech a man, and don’t any a yew fergit it. Yew hear me?”

“Aye, Chief!” the apes shouted in unison.

IMMEDIATELY AFTER MOORING under the hot tropical sun, the crew got busy loading the ship, not just with the usual food and fuel, but this time she took on a full complement of ASROCs, small arms ammo, five-inch projectiles, and powder. Lines of men formed from the pallets coming off the gray trucks on the wharf down to the bowels of the ship. It was like being an ant, Zack thought; one continuous line of never ending supplies being passed from one set of hands to another. The problem was finding enough room for it all. As storage spaces filled, destinations changed but the flow never slowed. The magazines had projectiles and powder stacked in them like firewood in a woodshed.

There was liberty, but very few took advantage of it. The base was about twenty-five miles from the nearest city, Honolulu, and the only way there and back was to chip in and hire a cab, if you could find one. Besides, they were too whipped from the re-supply, so in the evenings those apes not on duty usually wandered over to the base’s Enlisted Men’s Club, or “EM Club,” had a burger and a few beers, walked back to the ship, and soon fell into an exhausted, sweaty sleep.

Zack, Howell, Mueller and Kearns did take the short boat ride over to the USS Arizona Monument which was built on top of the sunken wreck of the battleship and the remains of the eleven-hundred sailors still entombed in her. There was an intangible part of this base that had a shrine-like quality. Almost two-thousand sailors had been killed here, and it felt like hallowed ground.

THREE DAYS LATER, a much laden Hawke turned around and headed back out to sea. Once clear of Pearl Harbor, she had been ordered to rendezvous with the aircraft carrier Coral Sea and travel with her to the Philippines, or as the troops called it, the “PI.” The news coming out of Vietnam was grim. The bombing campaign was ramping up and the Seventh Fleet needed as many of these mighty ships as the Joint Chiefs of Staff could send them.

WEIGHING ANYWHERE FROM forty-five to eighty-thousand tons and measuring around a thousand-feet long, the aircraft carriers of the 1960’s were by far the largest vessels in the world. They were floating cities with five-thousand member crews, and during the war they’d often stay on station for six months at a time.

The Captains of these Leviathans were the “Task Force Commanders,” and as a rule four destroyers were assigned to them for security purposes. Three of those ships would be placed in “screening positions” with one out in front on point, while the other two protected the flanks. The fourth followed astern ready to pluck shot-up pilots and their crews out of the sea should they be unable to make safe landings. However, in the early days of the war the United States was still shorthanded, so two destroyers usually did the work of four. One took care of all the “screening,” which meant keeping the carrier’s path clear of any and all obstacles, while the second was used for rescue.

The Coral Sea carried a full complement of eighty fighters and to launch and retrieve them she’d steam straight into the oncoming wind like a bat out of hell. Flinging those heavy, twenty-six ton flying machines up into the sky was a dangerous, gravity defying business requiring a lot of muscle and mechanical know-how. The catapults would hurl an aircraft off a 165 foot long flight deck in just two seconds at speeds of 170 mph! Landing was equally challenging. Their tail-hooks had to catch a cable at takeoff speeds which brought them to a complete bone-crunching stop on that same tiny, 165 foot deck.

As fast as these “Flattops” went, their escorts had to go faster. Racing into rough seas wasn’t a problem for one of those sixty-thousand ton monsters. They always rode smooth and stable, but destroyers were called “Tin Cans” by the rest of the fleet because they were extremely light and even on calm waters they bounced around like corks.

Missions took place around the clock and required tightly coordinated teamwork. Jets had to be thoroughly inspected, moved topside via elevators, jockeyed into position, and rearmed and refueled.

The pilots ran their engines full throttle before taking off and they could suck in a sailor like a hungry bullfrog sucking in a June bug. Many a good man lost their lives on those flight decks during the Vietnam War.

All unknown contacts on the sea and in the air were closely monitored. Those approaching the Task Force were regarded as potential threats and the radar gang kept a sharp eye on them. The lookouts were on high alert as well since smaller vessels were oftentimes hard to spot. In most cases, but not all, it was considered bad form to run them over. When it was deemed necessary to do so, it was only done for survival of the ships in the group, and even then, never by accident.

Part of the phone talker’s job was taking bearings from CIC and the lookouts, and plotting them on a large grease board so the OOD could see at a glance any given contact’s course, speed, and distance. CIC also tracked the same information for “friendly ships.” Nothing was left to chance, and all those near the area of operations were carefully scrutinized.

Since leaving Pearl, the deck apes had been intensively schooled on identifying the various aircraft coming off the flight deck of the Coral Sea. There were A-4 Skyhawks, F-4 Phantoms, F-8 Crusaders, A-7 Corsairs, and a few other specialized jets. The most important planes to know, however, were the Chinese MIG-17s and the MIG-21s. If either of these were sighted, they clearly had deadly intent, and at speeds of five hundred-seventy mph, there would not be much time to prepare for an attack.

AT 0200 THE HAWKE'S bridge was wide awake and bristling with energy. Longingly remembered but definitely gone were those sleepy, uneventful late night watches on the journey from San Diego to Hawaii. During this 5,336 mile leg of the crossing, the Hawke was learning a new trade. She was screening while the Halsey was on rescue duty trailing behind in their wake. The weather was bad and the waves were high as the Coral Sea launched flights. Above the bridge the signalmen were receiving flashing Morse code instructions and sending back confirmation of the same.

Below them, the OOD ordered: "Right full rudder, come about to course Three-two-zero."

"Right full rudder come about to course Three-two-zero, aye, sir!" Zack answered back smartly and spun the wheel. Out on the port bridge wing, Howell was scouring the horizon of his area from three-hundred-sixty to one-hundred-eighty degrees relative. Trying futilely to stay warm, he huddled up against the bridge bulkhead. Howell was wearing a foul weather jacket under a rain poncho, but the water continued to find its way through it all. He couldn't have been wetter had he just stepped fully clothed out of a long shower. The ship was clipping along at thirty-five knots and the wind wailed like a lost soul. Tropics be damned, he was shivering. His binoculars were constantly dripping, making them extremely difficult to use, and every now and again, the seas would come right up over the wing. Howell thought it was worse than the wild mouse ride at the Minnesota State Fair. In spite of it all, he had really good vision honed by years of putting game on the table. Out of the corner of his eye he detected a new light peeking over the horizon.

He reported it: "Bridge, Port lookout, I have a surface contact bearing three-one-zero, range twelve miles."

"Port lookout, aye."

The phone talker then called CIC to see if they were tracking it. If they weren't, they'd certainly be searching their screens for it now, and, if they already knew it was there, Howell had just visually confirmed it for them.

Zack looked over from the helm and thought Howell looked like a dog that had been put outside in bad weather. He had big sad eyes, and like a dog, he only had one thought in his ever so cold brain, “Let me in Master, I’ll be good, let me back in where it’s warm and dry.”

As Howell whined to himself, he watched the slowly moving clock, waiting for the Boatswain’s Mate of the Watch to rotate him back into the bridge. Captain Foley and his XO or Executive Officer, the Hawke’s second in command, stepped out onto the wing to talk privately. No sooner had they closed the door after themselves when the ship slipped down into a deep trough and an enormous swell crashed over the entire top of the bridge. Howell saw it coming and had just enough time to duck behind the break, but Foley and the Exec weren’t so fortunate. They were both thrown to the deck by the wayward wave, which began washing them over the side. Panicky, with more than good reason, the ship’s two highest ranking officers were embroiled in a life and death struggle to stay aboard and not be swept into the angry ocean. They grasped at anything graspable, and at many things that weren’t. Howell watched hopelessly with a growing sense of horror. He felt like a fortune teller who could clearly see his future, and it wasn’t looking good.

After the water receded, the two drenched officers jumped to their feet and rounded on Howell, “Why didn’t you warn us?!” they shouted.

Howell knew there was no way out without the tongue-lashing of a lifetime. True, he was a seaman doing a serious job on a ship of war, far away at sea, but he was also a seventeen year old kid, and even though he understood that he was totally screwed, he also saw the situation as funny. Not just funny, downright hilarious, and it was all he could do not to burst into hysterical laughter because he knew if he started, he wouldn’t be able to stop. For an instant he thought of what Zack would say about the whole thing, but banished that line of thinking immediately. Part of him realized if he even so much as cracked a smile, the thoroughly soaked Captain and Exec would unhesitatingly throw him over the side. All of these thoughts

went through his mind in about the time it took for an F-4 Phantom to be launched from the flight deck of the Coral Sea.

Howell put on his adult serious face, came to attention, and apologized as best he could, "Sorry sirs, there just wasn't no time. It happened so quick. It come out of nowhere...." They both glowered at him, the Captain no doubt silently cursing the day when the Bureau of Naval Personnel outlawed flogging. The Exec disgustedly told him, "As you were, sailor." and then they opened the door and went into the warm glow of the bridge, leaving the bad dog out in the cold.

After finally being relieved, Howell told Zack about it on their way down to the compartment, and they both howled with laughter, unable to stop. "You should have seen their faces!" Howell said roaring with glee.

THE FOLLOWING DAY, the three ships took a day off from training and started steaming due west in earnest. Later in the afternoon, the Coral Sea sent over a chopper with mail.

After knock-off, or the end of working hours, those deck apes not on watch lounged around the fantail reading their letters. Zack had four from Tally, two from his mom and dad, and one from his little sister, Annie. As he read them he was overwhelmed with homesickness. Tally, who was a high school senior, wrote cheerfully about the other students, her teachers, girl friends and some town gossip. His sister wrote of how she missed him, and how empty the house seemed with him gone. His mom and dad wrote about the family and farm, church members, the weather, and their hopes for a short winter and a good maple sugar season.

Usually Zack didn't spend much time thinking about Vermont. There was too much to learn, too much work to do, too many hours of watch, but these letters really hit him hard, really reminded him of all he had given up to be here, to serve his country. None of the other deck apes looked any happier than he felt. Those who didn't receive mail were saddened by the lack, and those who had were saddened with homesickness. It was a lose-lose situation

except, of course, for Howell. He always received five or six letters from five or six different girls, all proclaiming their undying love and devotion to Mr. Wonderful. As Howell finished reading his fan mail, he, being the exception, had a grin on his face as big as the cat that swallowed the canary. It wasn't that he didn't miss them all, it's just that he knew wherever he went, there would be more, lots more women who would see him for the stud he was, and give him all the love and attention he thought he deserved.

Also included in the mail bags were copies of the Navy's magazine "All Hands." They contained an article in which Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's security advisor, McGeorge Bundy told President Johnson, "The limited military approach in Vietnam isn't working and the country is at a fork in the road where we either must escalate or withdraw."

The President then made his ill-fated decision, and initiated a massive bombing campaign against the north.

What the article didn't say was on that very same day Russian Prime Minister Kosygin was in Hanoi being pressured by the Viet Cong to provide unlimited military aid to counter American aggression. As a result, sophisticated Soviet surface-to-air missiles began arriving in Hanoi. So, while the United States began ramping up the Naval Air War, the Cong began ramping up their capability to shoot down our jet fighters.



CHAPTER 5

TOWARDS FEBRUARY THE temperatures were consistently over one-hundred extremely humid degrees. The steel superstructure baked the inside of the destroyer as efficiently as an oven. Making it worse, there was no air conditioning and the compartments were like saunas.

The Hawke's orders were to report to the Subic Bay Naval Base in the northern Philippines. Small green islands began to appear, sporadically at first, but the closer the ship got to her destination the more abundant they became. As she approached Mindanao from the east, the Coral Sea and Hawke were instructed to proceed at once to Vietnam. The XO and the Quartermasters changed charts, plotted a new course, and both ships began steaming westerly through the Visayan Passage.

There are 7,157 Philippine islands, 2,000 of which are inhabited, and they cover an 115,831 square mile area. It was a beautiful journey and everywhere the deck apes looked there were islands of all sizes: some volcanic and tall, others comprised of coral and mangrove.

Standing watch as the starboard lookout, Zack marveled at the variety of watercraft he saw. With his binoculars he had a bird's eye view, and it seemed to

him that in this part of the world, anything that floated could be used as a boat. There were dugout canoes, rafts made out of logs, brush, and actual coconuts. Some were rigged with sails, others with rudimentary, primitive paddles. Zack didn't spend a lot of time wondering what they were doing, he instinctively knew; most were out there intent on providing food for their families.

SUBIC BAY WAS the second largest base in the hemisphere, and the most important port in the region. It provided all of the ships with the supplies they needed to prosecute the war and had several dry docks that could easily handle any shipboard repair. Vietnam was a thousand miles away on the other side of the South China Sea, or the "Puddle" as it was more commonly called. At 20 knots it was just a two day crossing. Captain Foley was disappointed with the change of orders, but not as disappointed as his wife would be. She had flown all the way to Manila with the intention of meeting him on the pier in Subic. Now she'd be waiting in vain and he knew sure as hell that wouldn't improve her disposition any. For him it was only a minor irritation. He shrugged it off. He knew they'd be back soon enough and he didn't waste a lot of time thinking about it. He had learned long ago that's how the Navy worked, and he had pressing matters to attend to; a job to do.

DURING THE WAR, carrier jets were assigned two types of missions: in the south they provided close air support for our own military and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam or, the "ARVN." In the north, they were flying air strikes designed to punish Ho Chi Minh and his boys.

From top to bottom Vietnam is about a thousand miles long. Saigon, the capitol of the south, is located on the banks of the Saigon River, inland from the Mekong Delta, while Hanoi, the capitol of the north, is located on the banks of Haiphong Harbor, inland from the Red River.

The United States had two launch sites. The northernmost one was designated "Yankee Station" and was positioned one hundred miles offshore

from Da Nang in the Tonkin Gulf. There were usually three flattops out there, each launching and retrieving aircraft in twelve hour coordinated shifts. They spent the other twelve hours working just as hard preparing to do it all over again.

The one in the south was designated “Dixie Station” and sat about fifty miles off the mouth of the Mekong Delta. Unlike Yankee, Dixie was manned by a single carrier, and that carrier would soon be the Coral Sea.

FOR THE PURPOSES of efficient resupply, it was logistically important for these ships to operate in close proximity with one another. As Napoleon Bonaparte said, “An army marches on its stomach.” On any given day there were approximately seventeen-thousand sailors out on Yankee Station and they had to be fed. During the Vietnam War the U.S. military dropped nearly eight-million tons of bombs, or about four times the amount used in World War Two. Those released from carrier based jets had to be replaced on a daily basis at sea, and of course the fleet always needed fuel. The supply ships never rested. They loaded up in Subic, headed out to Yankee Station where they were quickly emptied of their cargos, and went right back, reloaded and steamed back out to do it again and again, becoming part of a never-ending procession that continued throughout the war.

IN THE BEGINNING of February the Hawke was on Dixie Station, either screening or following the Coral Sea at flank speeds as she launched sorties in defense of our forces and allies. The crew was already tired of it. Not only was it monotonous, but when the destroyer changed courses and speeds to maneuver with the carrier, it constantly took on large waves when and where they were least expected, and the disgusted apes were always wet.

A WEEK LATER there was a change in the air. Palmer and a shipfitter showed up on the bridge and began welding pieces of steel to the tops of the

wings. When Howell asked what they were, Palmer looked up from his torch and said with a rare smile, “Top secret, boot, you’ll just have to wait and see.”

The next morning the mystery was solved when they appeared again and mounted a pair of .30 and .50 Caliber Browning Machine Guns on each side. Two new GQ positions had been created.

The .50 caliber Browning is a fearsome firearm with a 750-850 rounds per minute rate of fire. The cartridge is five-and-a-half inches long and the slug by itself is two-and-a-half inches with an effective range of 2,000 yards or one nautical mile. The .30 caliber Browning, or 1919M, is a smaller version of the .50 and was mounted primarily as a backup in case the larger gun jammed.

CHIEF McCoy was out on the port wing instructing Ensign Wells on the finer points of operating “Ma Deuce,” as the .50 was called because of its “M2” designation. Senior Chief Gunner’s Mate Larson was on the starboard wing doing the same with Ensign Pratt. Palmer was on hand to answer their questions and repair any malfunctions, should they occur. When everyone was ready, the apes threw old life jackets, food crates, pallets and other floating junk off the fantail as targets, and the ship began maneuvering so the machine gunners could familiarize themselves with their new weapons.

The Boatswain’s Mate of the Watch piped out for all hands to remain inside, then both teams opened up, and the noise of the rounds firing was overpowering as was the chattering of the spent shells bouncing every which way off the bulkheads and deck gratings. Every fifth round was loaded with a bright red armor piercing tracer so it was easy for them to see where they were hitting, making it a simple matter to correct their aim. The ship took the targets from close aboard, so they could practice with the smaller .30s, all the way out to the outer range of the .50s. Zack thought the guns chewed up their targets as efficiently as a wood chipper shredded brush.

They trained for nearly four hours and by the end, the crews were zeroing in, getting competitive and making bets with one another. The apes found

it hard to believe, as did everyone else on watch, that Ensign Wells had a talent for the work and seemed to be getting along with Chief McCoy. They ended up taking fifty bucks apiece from the disgusted starboard gunners.

THE FOLLOWING DAY the Hawke received orders to proceed to Cap St. Joque in Vung Tao, at the mouth of the Mekong Delta and join three other ships to form an Amphibious Assault Force. The Cong had become a real problem in that area and it was time to deal with them.

THE TASK FORCE Commander was the Captain of the USS Princeton, a nine-hundred foot assault helicopter carrier with thirty UH-34 Seahorse choppers and twelve-hundred Marines onboard.

In company with the Princeton was the USS Bexar, an amphibious assault ship that brought along fifteen-hundred of her own Marines and twenty-four landing craft.

Also in the group was the USS Thomaston which carried all of the equipment the troops would need once ashore, such as artillery, and Armored Personnel Carriers, or APCs.

The Hawke's assignment was to suppress any and all incoming fire.

THE SHIPS rendezvoused thirty miles from their destination and the Princeton's Captain sent out helicopters to bring back all the Task Force's senior officers for instructions. Landing twenty-seven-hundred plus Marines, even under optimum conditions, required a high level of communications and choreography to keep the inevitable accidents to a minimum.

THE CREW was briefed that evening: "This is the Captain speaking. Tomorrow we'll be part of an Amphibious Assault Force in Vung Tao Province, Republic of Vietnam. Our task is to identify and destroy all resistance to the mission. We'll slip into position in the early morning hours to draw

enemy fire away from the beach and the other ships in the group. General Quarters will be called at 0400 and it will not be a drill. You have trained hard and you are ready. I have full confidence in your ability to do your jobs and do them well. Those of you not on watch hit your racks. Tomorrow is going to be a long, hard day. May God bless and protect this crew, the ships in our group, and the Marines. Lights out and get some sleep if you can.”

Good advice, but no one slept well that night.

IT WAS STILL dark when General Quarters was sounded, and everyone grabbed their dungarees and hightailed it to their stations. Zack, toward Mount fifty-two, and Howell with the hawk eyes, had recently been assigned as port GQ lookout, so off he ran to the bridge.

When Zack’s gun crew assembled, Palmer informed them, “I just come out of a meetin’ with the Weapons Officer, and he told us that Recon Marines and members of the Underwater Demolition Team were put ashore last week and they located most of the Viet Cong positions. Fire control has them locked in and as soon as we report ready, we’re goin’ to blow them all to hell. Now this here is real. We ain’t trainin’ nomore. I want you all to move just as quick as you can, but I don’t want any sloppy work either. You projectile men make sure there aren’t any fingers or hands anywhere near your breeches. If we have an accident today jarheads could get hurt. You know I don’t like ‘em any better than the next squid, but it’s up to us to make sure none die on that beach, so get to your stations and let’s kill us some Cong.”

THOSE ON THE BRIDGE were completely focused on their duties as the Task Force steamed towards the coast. The Quartermasters were out on the wings wearing sound-powered phones, shooting bearings, and calling them in to the chief who was plotting them on a detailed chart. Depth was a major worry. Today would not be a good day to run aground. When the

ship was ready, the Captain ordered both turrets to open up with five round salvos of Willy Peter.

EVEN THOUGH HE had headphones covering his ears, Howell thought the sound of Mount fifty-one firing right below him was deafening. Night was slowly turning to day, and it was one of the most beautiful sunrises he'd ever seen. The clouds were painted in soft shades of pinks and purples, and were framed by a star speckled azure sky that was gradually lightening as the bright yellow sun began inching its way up out of the steel gray sea. About a mile in front of the ship was a spectacular long, white sand beach. Beyond that was a pristine jungle composed of every conceivable shade of green, and in the far distance he saw rugged forested mountains. The boom of the guns wasn't the only ear-shattering sound he heard either: the shells screamed shrilly as they blazed their way towards the enemy. Soon large swaths of jungle burned with fierce orange flames while thick black smoke smeared the pure blue skies.

The initial bombardment was used to check for accuracy, and the Captain must have been satisfied, because then he ordered the guns to fire rapid with frag. For the next hour they blasted out one long continuous barrage. When they stopped, most of the Viet Cong, especially those in close proximity to the landing zone, had been blown to bits.

Howell looked down and saw the gun crew come out to police their spent powder cases. If the brass was left laying on deck it sometimes rolled into the gears and crippled the mounts. Everywhere he looked was controlled chaos. On the Princeton, her choppers were warming up, and Marines in full combat gear were streaming into them. At the same time, the crews on the Bexar and Thomaston were readying and launching their boats.

VUNG TAO was a peninsula. As this operation was unfolding, ARVN soldiers were establishing kill zones further inland. The plan was to trap the Viet Cong in the middle and annihilate them.

LIKE A GIANT swarm of angry hornets, the helicopters lifted off the Princeton's flight deck; they speedily flew over the waves of the South China Sea and disgorged their cargos of combatants on the beach. Once disembarked, the Marines, with well practiced expertise, dug defensive emplacements close to the jungle. There were still some incoming mortar rounds, so the Hawke broke away from the other ships, looking for a vector that wouldn't endanger their own ground forces. Several minutes later the destroyer found the angle she required and with deadly efficiency silenced the remaining pockets of resistance.

Then the assault kicked into high gear with boats racing back and forth, loading and ferrying troops and combat gear. Meanwhile the Thomaston was getting ready to land her payload of M-113 APCs. These were lightweight, tracked vehicles with .50 caliber machine guns. Each of them carried eleven riflemen and could run over and through almost any obstacle. Their assignment was to advance up the peninsula and chase the surviving Cong into the waiting arms of the ARVN.

The choppers had successfully completed their task, and the Princeton's twelve-hundred Marines were in control of the beach. They were ready for the Bexar's squads when they disembarked from their landing craft and the OIC, or "Officer in Charge," directed them to their positions.

The Princeton ordered the Hawke to lay down more fires. The Cong were in full retreat, and now was the time to wipe them out before they reached the ARVN. The turrets immediately let loose with AAC. By the time the smoke cleared, Howell was a little deaf and dizzy and his face was streaked with powder residue.

Back in Mount fifty-two, the temperature was hovering around one-hundred-thirty degrees. The air stank with sweat, spent gunpowder, fuses, and projectiles. It clung to the men like cheap perfume on a Filipina hooker. The air was so thick with the caustic fumes that some of them were coughing and had trouble breathing. It was a distinctive stench of war no one there

would ever forget. By the time the Hawke was told to stand down she had fired over fifteen hundred rounds of ammo.

THE INVASION had gone without a hitch. Thanks to the Hawke there had been very few U.S. casualties since many of the Viet Cong had been scattered or killed before the last of the Bexar's landing craft reached the beach. Accordingly, there would be no shortage of Marines in the bars for Palmer's extracurricular activities.

That evening the Hawke secured from GQ but kept her mounts manned just in case the Marines needed any more help. The destroyer remained on station until noon the following day when they were relieved by the USS Black and given new orders to report to Subic Bay Naval Station.



CHAPTER 6

THE HAWKE'S entire medical staff consisted solely of Second Class Hospital Corpsman John Phillips. Although Phillips' training had been extensive, he was by no means a doctor, and yet he was still responsible for the health of every man onboard the Hawke. He was it. He was all that stood between the crew and death from disease or injury. Sometimes the responsibility was crushing.

Cruisers and carriers had real doctors, sometimes even surgeons, so in the ideal world if someone was severely injured or ill, if any of these larger ships were around, if weather conditions were right, if the constellations were in harmony and alignment, it might be possible to transport the patient over, or bring a real doc onboard to treat him. In the real world, Phillips was the only game in town.

DOC PHILLIPS WAS a tall, lanky African-American with a commanding presence. Although he was of a serious nature, he did have a sly sense of humor. As a civilian he had attended two years of college at Howard

University taking Pre-Med courses. He decided to enlist in the Navy to get some hands-on clinical experience before continuing his education. With his trusty, well thumbed, bloodstained corpsman's manual always at the ready, the doc had done appendectomies, set all manner of broken bones, sutured what seemed to him like miles of cut, ripped and torn flesh, and dealt with more death, injury, and disease than most journeyman physicians.

As with many in the medical field, Phillips believed an ounce of prevention was worth a pound of cure, so while the Hawke steamed across the puddle, he took it upon himself to educate the crew on the dangers of loose women, alcohol, drugs, food poisoning and the like. Division by division he gave his prepared speech and even as he did so he recognized the futility of his endeavor. He heard the snickers and yawns, he saw the rolled eyes, and it seemed to him that his spiel actually had the opposite effect. Rather than deterring the men, it just seemed to sharpen their anticipation for the wonderful times soon to come.

It was useless. He knew the practical reality, and so did the fleet. The first thing they'd do was get drunk and it'd all go downhill from there. They'd eat the worst kinds of dirty, disgusting native food right off the streets, get into fights and screw anything that moved, or for that matter, anything that didn't. With the fleet's approval Phillips had stocked up massive amounts of penicillin in readiness for all the cases of venereal diseases he knew he'd have to treat. It was the part of his job he absolutely hated the most. The crew awaited liberty with eagerness and joy. Doc Phillips awaited it with dread and foreboding.

TWO DAYS AFTER leaving the amphibious assault at Vung Tao, there was a foul stench in the air. Up on the bridge Eastman told the apes it was the town of Olongapo just outside the Subic Naval Base. "You can always smell it way befo' you see it," he said. It reminded Zack of when he'd been three years old on a blisteringly hot July day and had accidentally locked himself in the outhouse. "It's enough to make you want to puke," he said. Eastman,

ever the poet, corrected him. “Nah,” he said, “It’s enough to gag a maggot.” And sure enough, about an hour-and-a-half later, one of the lookouts sighted the island of Luzon beginning to peek out over the horizon. Shortly after, the mouth to Subic Bay was spotted and at 0735, the Special Sea and Anchor Detail was set for entering port.

The apes, all in tropical white uniforms, stood in formation on the forecandle while the ship slowed and eased into the channel. Zack looked around and marveled at how high the mountains were that bordered the shoreline and thought they were even greener than the Green Mountains of Vermont. He noticed large parts, strips really, where the trees looked like they’d been chewed up. No leaves, tops jagged, and broken off, branches missing. Almost looked like acreage that had been badly clear-cut at home. “Hey Chief,” he asked, “What happened to all those trees?”

“Typhoons come through here ever’ year and rip these islands up. Yew ain’t never seen the likes of it. Yew better hope we ain’t around the next time one gits a mind ta come a’callin’, or yew’ll find out jist how small a destroyer really is.”

It was almost a straight shot through the bay with a slight curve around Grande Island which stood in the way. It had a tall tower in the center that had been used as an observation post from the Spanish War onward. And with a final twist to the north the Hawke arrived in the docking spaces.

The Australian destroyer HMAS Hobart was tied directly to the pier and her sailors were busily working on deck. Up on the Hawke’s bridge, Captain Foley ordered the OOD to take the ship alongside, and with the help of the Aussies, the apes swiftly had it moored. While the Boatswain of the Watch secured from the Special Sea Detail and set the In-Port Watch, First Division went below to change back into dungarees. Although it was about 110 degrees out, there was still plenty of time before knock-off.

Both ships’ crews were soon back at work. The American deck apes had gone up to the boatswain’s locker and been issued the usual tools of the trade: paint scrapers and wire brushes. They all carried Case knives in belt sheaths.

These knives had two long blades; the larger, flatter one was kept moderately sharp and used for scraping paint, and the thin one was kept scalpel sharp for cutting line. Other apes had been sent to the paint locker amidships for red lead which was a primer, and haze and deck gray, the two colors of all United States warships. The painters followed behind the scrapers.

At 1030 all hot and sweaty work promptly ceased on the Hobart. Everyone just collapsed wherever they were. Then two mess cooks garbed in greasy whites popped out of a hatch, wrestled a big garbage can topside and began lugging it around the ship's main deck. Wherever they encountered a sailor they stopped and issued each man two big cans of ice cold beer. This happened twice a day: once midmorning, and again in midafternoon. "Tropical Rations" they called it.

Likewise, all work stopped on the Hawke as the crew resentfully watched their neighbors guzzling cold beer. Making matters worse, some of the Aussies actually had the temerity to toast the apes: "Cheers, Yanks!" It was intolerable. Thoughts of piracy began to cloud their minds. The boatswains, realizing a mutiny was likely, tried to get them back to work. Dixon's heart wasn't really into it, and how could it be, when he too was drooling? Nevertheless, he shook himself free from his beer trance, and reasoned with his rebellious troops, "Listen you maggots, don't even look at them. Knock-off's at 1530 today, and those of you without the duty'll be able to go on the beach and drink all ya want. Come on now, turn-to."

The deck apes were a grouchy lot, but they reluctantly started working again while surreptitiously checking their watches every few minutes. When 1530 finally rolled around, they had already returned their gear and fairly flew down to the compartment to shower and change back into tropical whites to hit the beach.

The ship was now connected to pier side water, and Zack took his first long shower since leaving San Diego. At sea the ship desalinated saltwater, so freshwater was always in short supply and was used sparingly. When he got out and began toweling off, he couldn't get dry. About ten minutes later

he realized he was sweating himself wet as quickly as he dried himself off. The compartment was 115 degrees, so he threw on his tropical whites, and ran topside where the temperature was only slightly better.

Zack made his way to the quarterdeck, saluted the Flag, saluted the Officer of the Deck, requested and was given permission to go ashore, and then he walked down the gangplank to the Hobart whose OOD allowed him to cross over to the pier.

On terra firma at last, he went looking for Howell, Mueller and Kearns. They all saw each other at the same time and Zack stumbled as he hurried to join them. "Is it just me," he said, "who's havin' trouble with my balance?" The others laughed because they were experiencing the same thing. They had been at sea for so long that when they got off the ship, it felt like the pier and the ground were rocking, just as the Hawke had for the past month-and-a-half. It's a normal condition caused by the middle ear and usually subsided in two or three hours. Until then the seamen would have an exaggerated rolling gait as their bodies unconsciously compensated for wave movement that wasn't there anymore.

They did their "Popeye the sailorman" walk to the end of the pier, and after finding out that public transportation would take them to the main gate, they got in line with a bunch of other squids. Sure enough, in no time at all, a haze-gray diesel tractor pulling a huge haze-gray trailer, the type used in the states to transport cattle, pulled up and they all started piling in. The interior had been redone to accommodate human passengers. A no-frills bench had been built into the inside perimeter wall. That was it. When the benches filled, the rest stood.

The cattle car kept picking up more and more passengers from the multitude of ships moored along the way. When it was finally overloaded to the point of bursting, it suddenly lurched to an abrupt halt, and its human cargo began piling out like clowns out of a Volkswagen.

The deck apes found themselves standing about a hundred yards away from the Naval Station's gates, which were guarded by Marines. Next to

the bus stop was a booth, a stand of sorts. In it were primitive displays with even more primitive weapons for sale: blow guns, ornate war clubs, handmade knives, and swords of all sizes and shapes. Zack took one look at them said to his buddies, "If Palmah gets his hands on one of those clubs, those ja'heads ah gonna be in some bad trouble." Everyone had a good laugh, but after he said it, Zack didn't think it was so funny. If Palmer and Slocum got drunk enough, saw the Marines, saw the clubs, no, he didn't want to contemplate that at all....

The items were being sold by little black men who looked like African Pygmies. They were "Negritos," an aboriginal tribe that lived deep in the rain forests. They helped train U.S. Special Forces, and in return, received the privilege of being allowed on the base to sell the things they made.

Passing through the gates, the sailors came to a bridge that crossed over what was easily the most nauseating body of water in the world. There were no sewage treatment plants here, no leach fields, none of that stuff. There was only this poor polluted estuary, and all of the city's raw sewage went straight into it. Although it was officially named the "Olongapo River" on the charts, for obvious reasons it was known to one and all as the "Shit River."

The deck apes walked onto the bridge. They looked down and saw a dozen or so kids between the ages of six and twelve swimming in the fetid sludge looking up and begging the passing troops to throw coins. "Throw money, Joe, throw money!" Some did, and these children would dive down and somehow find it in the murky effluent.

On the other side of the river, they were greeted by a second wave of urchins who were a little older and larger than the divers. These they had been warned about. They tried to approach GI's by offering to sell gum or shine shoes, but if enough of them could get close, they'd roll you right there, like a pack of starving wolves taking down a healthy buffalo. If any of them even lightly bumped into you, your watch and wallet were as good as gone.

AND THAT'S THE WAY it is the world over. Poverty breeds crime. In 1965, Zack and his fellow Seamen Apprentices were earning ninety-seven-dollars and fifty-cents a month. The currency of the Philippines was the peso. There were one-hundred centavos in a peso, just like pennies in a dollar, and the dollar was worth four pesos. There was only one make of beer to be had there: San Miguel, and an ice cold bottle in a bar was fifty centavos, so as you can see, everyone who crossed over from the base, regardless of rank, was rich in the eyes of the Filipinos.

For many seamen apprentices, the Navy was their first real paycheck. They had absolutely no life experience to prepare them for how things worked in Olongapo. Any prior knowledge they had accumulated back in the states was absolutely useless here. It just didn't apply. They may as well have been on Mars. They were fish out of water; strangers in a strange land.

Olongapo was more than a city, it was a machine that had been built and refined over the years for only one purpose: to strip each sailor of every last penny, and more. When the squids were fleeced of all they had, they could always return to their ships and borrow from the loan sharks at a rate of five bucks for seven on the following payday, which came around every two weeks. Many did just that.

This was not a land of church socials, not a land of record hops and drive-in movies, or modest church-going young women. This was not a land of first dates to the movies, or shy unspoken true love. This was a land that would take your money, grind you up and spit you out, bruised, battered, bloody and broke. The smartest thing the Hawke's deck apes had done thus far was to go ashore as a group. It's like the old adage says, "there's safety in numbers."

AFTER SUCCESSFULLY NAVIGATING their way through the ragamuffin gauntlet, the whole world of Magsaysay Drive lay before them. Magsaysay was the town's main drag and it was against the law for any members of the military to leave it. The first thing they noticed was the

street itself. Coming from Vermont, Zack knew a thing or two about dirt roads, but this, he thought to himself, takes the cake. Couldn't really call it dirt either. It looked more like a red, shoe sucking, tire rutted bog. It rained every afternoon in the Philippines. Not a gentle rain either, but turbulent mini storms that lashed the palm trees and dumped an inch or two of precipitation in the process, and it all seemed to end up right on this road.

The local vehicles were perfectly adapted to these conditions. After World War Two, the U.S. went home and left thousands of Willys jeeps behind. The enterprising Filipinos had extended the beds and converted them into roofed over but open-sided taxis and buses which they rechristened "jitneys." But they didn't stop there. "Look at that," Kearns said pointing at what was surely the gaudiest vehicle any of them had ever seen as it came slithering through the muck. "Holy Crap!" Mueller said in open mouthed admiration as they gazed upon a mud splattered Jitney, resplendent in vibrant colors with an enormous picture of Our Lady of Guadeloupe on the hood. The sides were adorned with murals portraying angels in clouds and the three crosses on Golgotha. Had the apes been able to see inside, they'd have been doubly amazed, for more painted Biblical motifs crowded every square inch of its interior. Jitneys were much more than mere means of public transportation; they were bright little rolling religious shrines rushing up and down Sodom and Gomorrah's main street delivering their passengers to the Devil's dens of damnation.

The only other kinds of cars to be found here were the Shore Patrol's olive green jeeps, and the civilian police force's white Volkswagen Beetles. There were also throngs of multicolored motorbikes with roofed over side cars vying with jitneys for fares.

As the apes continued their stroll up Magsaysay, they passed drug stores, which they would learn, sold amphetamines and barbiturates to the troops without requiring pesky things like prescriptions, they passed souvenir shops with velvet paintings of sunsets and Elvis, they passed hotels which were

mostly cat houses, and, of course, they passed hundreds of bars. There were, in fact, some five hundred of them clustered along the main drag.

WALKING WAS HOT and sweaty work so the boys decided to get a beer and sauntered into the Kit Kat Klub. What they didn't know, and were about to find out, was that these bars were often fiercely tribal.

It was still early and the ceiling fans turned lazily as they churned the steamy hot air. The bar girls were huddled together at a table by the big front window idly playing cards. The bartender was icing beer behind his long bar, and a mini rent-a-cop with a club almost the same size he was, sat in a back corner. The only other patrons were three Marines seated at a table set for six. As Howell in the lead walked past them, a tall thin lance corporal with a zit-pocked face, arrogantly leaned back in his chair and announced, "This here's a Marine bar, you pussies. You better get out a here before we kick your muthah fucking asses."

He no sooner got the last word out of his mouth when Howell, who had boxed Golden Gloves prior to enlisting in the Navy, hit him on the side of his head with a tremendous roundhouse right knocking him over backwards onto the filthy, hard packed, dirt floor. The jarhead sitting next to him started to jump up and turn around, but before he could fully do so, Zack gave him two quick uppercuts to the stomach. When he doubled over unable to breathe, Zack shoved him into the table which collapsed under his weight. The Marine tried to get up, lost his footing, stumbled and fell, and Zack followed Howell's example by giving him several well placed kicks to keep him on the ground. Meanwhile, Kearns had grabbed the last one from behind as he stood, and Mueller was working him over. Kearns hooked the jarhead's shins with his leg and threw him down. When he hit the deck they both quickly put the boots to him too.

From start to finish, the whole thing probably hadn't taken more than twenty seconds. The apes had learned their lesson well. The suddenness and viciousness of their attack was the same tactic the Hawke had recently

employed at Vung Tao and it worked just as successfully for them here; hit first, hit hard, and don't stop until the enemy is no longer a threat.

The boys were not stupid. They knew the sea gods had given them the advantage of surprise and favored them four against three. But, they also knew there were several other Marines unaccounted for somewhere nearby, and should they shortly return, these extra jarheads had the potential to turn the tide of battle against them.

The lone security guard had wisely decided not to take on the four young squids by himself and was now furiously blowing his whistle as he hastily attempted to assemble enough similar sized and similarly armed officers to help him capture the miscreants. Seeing what was afoot, the apes were not inclined to linger. "RUN!" Howell shouted and that's precisely what they did, laughing hysterically as they ran out of the Kit Kat Klub and pounded down the street leaving chaos in their wake.

After retreating several blocks and seeing no signs of pursuit the apes slowed to a walk, besides, they couldn't run any further because they ached so bad from laughing so hard. Howell grinned his idiot grin and said, "Who're the muthah fucking pussies now?!" And they cracked up again.

ALL OF THE RUNNING, not to mention the altercation with the Marines, had gotten them thirsty again, but now they were a bit more cautious. At the Acme Club, they peered through the front window and saw no signs of any jarheads, so they went in and sure enough, it looked like neutral ground with squids from several different ships sharing the bar. The apes took an empty table and after their cold San Miguels had been served, were immediately pounced upon by a bevy of young belles vying for their affections.

Zack wasn't having any of it. He was made of sterner stuff. He had pledged his troth to his beautiful Tally back in the Northeast Kingdom. They had discussed marriage, and finally on his leave following boot camp, had "gone all the way." He would not betray her. On the other hand, it was

surely pleasant enough drinking cold beer and talking with the exotically lovely Lailani, but he was determined to stay faithful. Besides he was one of the few who had actually listened to Doc Phillip's little talk and was terrified that if he went with one of these girls, he would eventually watch in horror while his pecker fell off.

The other three didn't seem too worried about the possibility of permanently losing their manhoods. They each had picked those they liked the best, and with the help of these chosen ones, drove off the surly pack of the less favored. Their girls quickly progressed to the point of "buy me drink," which cost considerably more than the sailors' beers and contained considerably less alcohol. Actually, no alcohol. Their drinks were colored sugar water. Separating sailors from their pesos was a serious business requiring sharp and sober minds. However, the drunker they could get the apes, the easier it would be to pick them clean.

Several beers later and the girls were sitting on their laps. Several more after that and they began to wiggle a bit and profess undying love. To all but Zack that is. Lailani had flounced off in disgust after finding out what a tight-fisted Yankee he was when he refused to buy her any more drinks.

OLONGAPO WAS NOT without its own unwritten rules and taboos, and when any of them were broken, there were penalties to be paid. The hookers' strange custom of pseudo-monogamy was a prime example: while their sailors' ships were in port, and ONLY while their sailors' ships were in port, the girls remained steadfastly true to them, but it cut both ways. They demanded the same degree of fidelity from their temporary husbands. Every one of them carried wicked, razor-sharp butterfly knives and they weren't afraid to use them. Even worse, most were evil tempered and if they caught their men cheating, all hell would break loose and blood would fly. And they would find out. They always did. The bar girl grapevine was finely tuned and highly efficient. So while the apes were merely thinking short-term about a quick roll in the hay, these pragmatic girls were thinking long-term about

riding the gravy train. If all went according to plan, every time the apes' ship came in, their ship would come in too.

LONG ABOUT DARK, four long-haired kids showed up who looked to be sixteen or so. They dragged in a bunch of sound equipment and musical instruments, and began setting up on a bandstand in the corner. They were clearly professional, and in no time at all were on stage tuning their guitars, dialing in their microphones, and then began covering all of the top hits from the U.S.A.

One of the favorites was the, "John B." by the Beach Boys:

"We come on the ship John B,
my Grandfather and me,
around Nassau town we did roam.
Drinking all night,
got into a fight,
well, I feel so broke up
I want to go home."

IT SOON BECAME the unofficial anthem of Olongapo. The apes danced a few times, but by then were growing hungry and politely asked the girls if they wanted anything to eat. The beauties wisely shook their heads collectively and emphatically no. The apes got up and took their leave promising to return shortly. When they stepped outside, they noticed a new smell beginning to overlay that of the Shit River. There were vendors everywhere grilling unidentifiable meat over wood fires, and a not unpleasant cloud of dense pungent smoke now filled the air.

Down on the corner a withered old gentleman was selling what the apes thought were hard boiled eggs. After a little negotiation, a price was agreed upon, and money and eggs changed hands. Zack was the first to crack his open, and to his horror and dismay, he realized this certainly did not

resemble any hardboiled egg he had ever eaten. He was so startled, that he dropped it and it slid down the top of his once bright white tropical dress shirt, leaving a long stinky trail of ooze as it did. Stinky? Yes, because as hideous as it was to behold, its smell was even worse. It smelled dead; road kill too-long-out-in-the-sun dead. “This ain’t no hahdboiled egg!!!” Zack exclaimed in horror, as the other apes hurled theirs away and began laughing at him. The old man shook his head at the spectacle of these foolish young Americans wasting all that good food.

Zack was right. It wasn’t a hardboiled egg. It was a balut, one of the finest delicacies in the Philippines. In the U.S. we take refrigeration and electricity for granted, but in most Asian countries it wasn’t available, so fermentation was used for preservation. They took a fertilized egg with a well developed duck or chicken fetus inside, buried it in the ground for several months at the right time of year, and it fermented, preserving the embryo. And there you have it: balut.

Once again they started off down the street. By now the night was in full swing and every bar had a band of about the same caliber as the Acme Club’s. The night was alive with the competing sounds of the Rolling Stones, Beatles, and the Beach Boys being loudly played and sung in heavily accented English.

The apes stopped to inspect several braziers of cooking barbeque. The vendors assured them it was monkey meat. Both Zack and Howell had more than a passing knowledge of mammalian anatomy and weren’t so sure. Howell said, “If that’s a monkey, it sure has tiny arms.” Zack cracked them up by firing back, “If that’s a monkey, then I’m a monkey’s uncle!”

There were no DNA tests back in 1965, so the identity of the meat being grilled on the streets of Olongapo remains shrouded in mystery. It couldn’t have been dogs or cats because there were no dogs or cats to be found there. Smart money says it was rats. Rats loved rice and there was certainly no shortage of either. When the Filipinos got ready to harvest, they’d take up pots and pans which they’d bang loudly with clubs as they surrounded their paddies, driving the multitude of fat, free-loading, rice fed rats into an ever

shrinking circle until the villagers got close enough to beat them to death. It was an ideal situation: carbohydrates from rice, protein from rats, and pesos from sailors for the surplus of both.

BUT THE NIGHT wasn't getting any younger, and the apes had put away more than a few cold San Miguels. They were feeling no pain and were starving, so they stopped at the next vendor's brazier and began scarfing down whatever the hell it was, little arms and all, and it was GOOD!! Redneck country boy that Zack was, he thought it had a fine smoky flavor, and tasted kind of like a cross between a woodchuck and a raccoon. Not bad. He'd had much worse, and briefly beaver crossed his mind; now that was some meat nasty enough to gag a maggot. Somewhere in the back of his brain though, Zack could hear Doc Phillips screaming, "No, no, no, don't do it! You eat that disease ridden filth and your dick will rot off!!" He knew it didn't make a whole lot of sense, but he recognized he was more than a little in the bag and not necessarily firing on all six, so he shut out Doc Phillips, like Pinocchio shut out Jiminy Cricket, and ate some more mystery meat anyway.

WITH BELLIES NOW gorged, they marched full steam ahead back to the Acme Club, reclaimed their seats and their girls who greeted them with relieved smiles and brought them more beers. By now the apes were bombed. No doubt about it. The lights were dim, the music loud, and the women hot. Dancing had now become a full contact sport, and when not dancing the girls seemed to prefer sitting on laps rather than chairs. Soon different options were being discussed: "Me love you for short time" or "Me love you for long time."

Since all sailors had to be back aboard their ships by midnight, going ashore in the PI was called "Cinderella Liberty." It was now 2200, and the possibility of "Me love you for long time" was fading fast. And of course,

before any of this could happen, cash needed to change hands. To bring the evening's romances to a climax, the girls explained to the now rapturously enthralled apes, it was customary for each to pay twenty-five pesos to the bar. Hotel rooms were an additional twenty-five, and twenty-five more were requested by these beauties for their professional services. Zack's friends were good with that, and they and the ladies of the Acme Club left in a lustful heartbeat.

Zack finished his beer, went out to the street and caught a jitney back to the base. After passing through the gates, he wandered over to a cattle car. He realized something was seriously amiss when he heard loud, rowdy noises pouring out of it: there were shouts, screams, thuds, and curses and cries. Meanwhile, it was bouncing around like a ship in a storm. His curiosity was roused, and as he cautiously climbed aboard he looked around and couldn't believe his eyes; the crowd in the middle of the trailer was embroiled in a big bloody free-for-all! Fists were swinging, legs were kicking, heads were bashing and bodies were thrashing. There must have been thirty mindless boozehounds rolling around on that filthy floor doing their very best to beat one another to death.

MILITARY POLICE will tell you that the unruliest offenders of all are crews from Navy ships that have been at sea for extended periods of time. Fly-boys, soldiers, and Marines gave them at least a small measure of respect, but not squids. After a few beers they didn't recognize any authority at all and seemed to delight in taking any and every opportunity to fight. And they were tough bastards. Someone once said that the only difference between being in prison and being in the Navy was that you had more of a chance of drowning on a ship. At sea they fought each other, ashore they fought everyone else. So this was not an anomaly, not an aberration. It was routine. Business as usual. Brawls took place in every single one of these late night returning cattle cars, seven nights a week. A military cop's life wouldn't have been worth a plug nickel in any of them.

ZACK WARILY TOOK a seat on the bench. When he leaned forward and put his elbows on his knees to rest, a red-faced combatant who was completely buried beneath a large pile of his fellow gladiators, shook his head free, and striking with the speed of a snake, reared up and bit Zack's thumb. Just gobbled it down like a bass sucking in a minnow. Then he really chomped ahold of it and began grinding away. The human jaw is capable of exerting more than six-hundred pounds per square inch of pressure, and the drunk who had attached himself to Zack's thumb like a spring loaded trap, was doing his very best to utilize every one of those psi's to chew it completely off.

Zack had never felt pain this excruciating before. To move it even a little just made it worse, a lot worse. "Let go, damn you!" Needless to say, this entreaty fell upon deaf ears because in his assailant's state of amphetamine and alcohol induced madness, he couldn't hear a thing: not the raging sounds of the fight, or anything Zack was hollering at him. Nothing. But way down in the deepest, darkest recesses of his skull there were evil voices whispering to him, and they were telling him to forget everything, to forget his surroundings and pain, to let loose his rage and tear this thumb right off, right now.

Zack quickly and sensibly began the laborious process of pounding his deranged attacker off his damaged digit. Every punch he delivered just seemed to make his biter that much more determined to wolf it down, which increased the pain and infuriated Zack all the more.

When, after what seemed like an eternity, he finally succeeded in freeing his now mangled and bloody thumb, he was so enraged that he just kept on pulverizing the maggot's face. He reasoned somewhere way back in the Neanderthal/reptilian part of his brain, that if he knocked out all of those sharp little teeth and the red-faced bastard tried doing it again, he'd be a source of mirth not pain. When Zack finally stopped, grimly satisfied with his handiwork, it was readily apparent that his antagonist was going to need some serious dental work and a nose transplant. Maybe just graft his big toe or dick right onto the middle of his face.

At some point in all of this, he realized he too had joined the ranks of the stoned out, mindless Zombies in the middle of the cattle car. Audience participation was always welcomed in the PI, and he had received an invitation he was unable to refuse.

WHEN THE FOURTEEN-WHEELED rolling donnybrook came to a stop at the Hawke's pier, Zack staggered out and took stock of himself: a mere six-and-a-half hours earlier he had been a squared away sailor in a bright white tropical uniform. Now that uniform was both filthy and stinky with balut, ground in red mud from the floor of the cattle car, and blood stains, probably some of the Marine's, his own, and that damn red-faced son-of-a-bitch's, he assumed. His shirt had also sustained some random rips here and there. His gnawed thumb was bleeding badly and his left hand was rapidly swelling from the labors required to free its neighbor from the teeth of doom. All in all, after his first liberty in Subic Bay, he felt like crap. Worse than crap. He crossed over the Aussie destroyer, boarded the Hawke without incident, and gratefully hit his rack.

AS BAD AS he had felt the night before, it did not compare with how rotten he felt the next morning. He had the mother of all hangovers, his thumb was already showing signs of an infection from hell, and his left hand was throbbing big time. After Quarters he got permission to visit Doc Phillips in sick bay.

There was a long line of patients with a long list of complaints most of which were the result of too much firewater. Zack's problem was unique, inasmuch as none of the others had been bitten. He was tired of the whole thing. He had told his story innumerable times by now, and every time he did, he ended up the butt of the joke. The damn thing hurt like the devil, and wasn't doing any wonders for his now sullen disposition.

When he finally got to the front of the line, he again told the tale for what seemed like the hundredth time. Doc Phillips predictably roared with

laughter and Zack would have hit him if his thumb hadn't swollen up to twice its normal size. His other hand wasn't in much better shape either due to the injuries it had received while bashing out the fangs of the red-faced snapping turtle. It had now puffed up to the point where it resembled a catcher's mitt.

As Phillips examined the wounds, he advised Zack, "If you intend to continue extracting teeth, use a pair of pliers next time. Much less damage to your hands that way." With a chuckle he gave Zack an enormous injection of penicillin plus two envelopes: one full of APCs, or aspirins, the other full of penicillin pills, and told him to go hit his rack. "No work for you for awhile. If you're going to get bit, there's nothing worse than getting bit by a human. Even a rat or a dog has a cleaner mouth. You're going to be fighting a bad infection for the next few days. If it gets any worse you come right back here, mosh skosh, and come back tomorrow morning anyway so I can keep my eye on it. Next!"

Zack spent most of the next three days in his rack. Between the massive dosage of antibiotics and the infection in both hands, he found himself in a kind of twilight zone somewhere between waking and sleeping. Two days later the swelling finally began to diminish and by day four, he was taken off the "No duty list." In the meantime, his three buddies had spent all their money and were now faced with the prospect of borrowing more or staying onboard.

KEARNS BELIEVED LIEZEL, his girl of the night, was in love with him, as he was with her. As proof of her love, she was no longer charging him for her services, although he was now paying more to get her out of the bar and for the hotel room. The cruiser USS Oklahoma City was here, she explained, and therefore everything was much more expensive. She did have a point. After an aircraft carrier which had been out on Yankee Station for six months dropped anchor, and five-thousand guys with all that back pay in their pockets flooded a town, the surplus of men and money drove local

prices right through the roof. When that happened a tin can sailor couldn't afford to walk on the wharf let alone go ashore. A cruiser wasn't quite so bad. Like destroyers, they usually stayed out thirty to forty-five days at a time. Once they came in, their thousand member crews did cause some inflation, although they didn't disrupt the local economy as severely as a carrier. Nevertheless, Liezel's love had bankrupted the unfortunate Kearns.

Kearns started borrowing from a slush fund which is what the loan sharks' banks were called, and spent every minute he could with his honey. Liezel was from a remote island in the very southern part of the chain. She made it sound like paradise, but like all the other working girls in Olongapo, it was all about the money. She had been here about a year and hated the life and wanted to return home.

Howell, Mueller and Zack began going to the Enlisted Men's Club on the base, or taking the ferry out to Grande Island. For a few bucks they could rent snorkeling gear and spend time swimming over the colorful reefs. There was a bar there, too, so beer was always abundant and cheap. And then it was time to return to Vietnam.



CHAPTER 7

JOINING THE NORTH VIETNAM PEOPLE'S ARMY, or the NVA, had not been what Private Phan Van Huong had envisioned. Whereas he thought he was going to be part of an heroic struggle to liberate a deliriously grateful people, and would be welcomed by the village maidens with admiring eyes and open legs, nothing could have been further from the truth. The peasants in his squad's area of operation viewed them with suspicion and hostility. Rather than liberating them, the Communist's actions only served to heap more pain on lives that were already overwhelmed with toil and hardship

The Americans controlled the countryside by day, but by night it belonged to the Viet Cong, and his sergeant, Trinh Huu Dai, was a merciless, despotic dictator. Examples were made of those who cooperated with the enemy, or talked to the enemy, or smiled at the enemy, or made eye contact with the enemy, or hoarded their food supplies. The list was endless, and woe to any who violated it knowingly or unknowingly. Community and family leaders were mutilated and killed. Wives and daughters were tortured and

raped. He had witnessed his comrades zealously erase entire clans for minor infractions. Phan had served the cause for little more than six months and he was already sick of it.

He soon learned the civilians could care less who their masters were, be it Saigon or Hanoi, as long as they were left alone to make their meager livings from the land or sea. There was an old saying in this war torn land: “When the elephants fight, the ants get squashed.” Phan and his squad had most certainly squashed a lot of ants.

JUNK FORCE DIVISION 22’s Headquarters were down on the protected waters of Qui Nhon Harbor, and Sergeant Trinh hated them more than anything in the world. He was obsessed. He wanted to destroy them and drink their blood. Division 22 was tasked with intercepting arms and munitions smuggled south from Hanoi. With thousands of vessels out daily on the South China Sea, it sounded like an impossible undertaking. And it had been until the Junk Forces had regrouped into twenty-eight divisions, each with up to sixteen sampans and junks. Now they efficiently covered the entire South Vietnamese coast.

Their junks were nothing special. Some were motorized, some were not, and they wore no uniforms. The only source of identification was their hated black berets with junk insignias and tattoos of “Sat Cong” which meant “Kill Communists.” Their ability to travel incognito posed the gravest danger of all to the Cong. The smugglers had no idea of how near was the tiger until he pounced. Since the reorganization, arms shipments had gone from a torrent to a trickle. Sergeant Trinh’s hatred for the Americans and their running dogs knew no bounds.

His squad kept a continuous watch on the headquarters and while Division 22 showed no signs of weakness, inadvertently another installation slowly came into Trinh’s cross-hairs.

Posted on a high ridge, they saw the Navy’s construction battalion: the Sea Bees, putting up living quarters to accommodate the growing number

of troops stationed here. Several of his men noticed that the sailors were using only hollow red bricks and mortar without any reinforced concrete or rebar. From what they could observe, it appeared to be a shoddily built barracks being erected entirely in haste with absolutely no materials incorporated in the structure for strength or stability. In short, the Sea Bees were providing Sergeant Trinh with the perfect target upon which to unleash his rage.

As the four story building took shape, so did a plan in Trinh's mind. When it was finally completed and 273 American soldiers moved into their new home, it was time for action. Trinh's twenty-man unit assembled on the radio tower mountain overlooking Qui Nhon. Instructions were issued; AK-47s were cleaned, oiled, locked and loaded. Thirty round clips were passed around and secured.

Private Phan, who always drew the shit details, was carrying one of the two backpacks containing fifty pounds of Russian plastic explosives. And because he was, in Sergeant Trinh's estimation, completely useless and therefore disposable, he'd been given a detonator and commanded to blow himself up should it become necessary to do so to successfully complete their mission. Trinh explained to Phan that if he failed to perform this duty, he and his family would be begging to die long before the sergeant finished ending their pitiful lives in ways more painful than they could ever imagine. Sweating and trembling, Phan believed every word and fervently wished he'd become a rice farmer instead of a soldier.

Trinh's proposal was approved by Hanoi, and several other local cadres had been brought in to draw attention away from the main objective. The squad was divided in half, and began the perilous descent through the impenetrable trackless terrain. Phan was terrified. Terrified of everything; terrified of snakes in the dark, terrified of falling, terrified of his backpack full of explosives, and most of all, he was terrified of Sergeant Trinh. There were so many crazy thoughts rolling around in his head that he lost his concentration, slipped on a wet rock and started to fall. To add to his overwhelming

panic and fright, his full bladder decided at that moment to empty itself. Trinh grabbed him from behind, steadied him while hissing softly in his ear, "Careful you worthless piece of dog dung, do you wish to kill us all?"

At exactly 2005 the Cong began coordinated diversionary attacks around the city. Soon the sounds of AK-47 chatter and returning fire from American M-14s could be heard, sporadic at first, but becoming more urgent in nature. Since the scheme had been of Sergeant Trinh's making, the thrust of the operation fell to his squad. The two teams regrouped in the shadows of the tall weeds growing by the concertina wire fence. There were two ARVN guards posted, but the gates were, as usual, wide open. The careless sentries were smoking and laughing at some small inconsequential joke. Sergeant Trinh earnestly wished that Junk Division 22 was this negligent.

From their concealment they could see that the barracks' main entrance was closed tight and they assumed it to be locked. They had prepared for this possibility, and Trinh readied two sappers and four riflemen to blow the doors. After a short interval, both of the privates carrying the plastic explosives accompanied by six more riflemen were to follow behind them in a second wave. If the sappers were killed, then Phan and his comrade were to get as close to the building as they could and detonate themselves. The rest of the squad stayed back to provide covering fire.

Trinh slowly crept out of the shadows, moving stealthily toward the guards. The heedless fools let him get within pistol range and they paid for their carelessness with their lives. The sound of the two shots was the starting signal, and the first assaulters charged toward the building. Seconds later the team carrying the explosives began their own mad dash. The cat was out of the bag now and American soldiers, many with weapons, piled out onto the balconies to see what was going on. The Cong opened up on them, but the GI's hastily returned fire at both the rapidly approaching NVA attack troops and the bright AK-47 muzzle flashes lighting up the darkness by the fence. Two of the riflemen and a sapper were immediately hit. Still, the other one made it to the entrance and promptly blew the doors right off the

hinges. Without pause or hesitation the Cong swarmed into the entrance hall sweeping their AK-47s back and forth killing or wounding all in their path. Phan and the private with the other backpack rushed in and carefully put their deadly loads down on the floor. The sapper quickly set short fused detonators into the charges, and then they were back out of the building running, running, running through the hail of bullets as the Cong riflemen tried to suppress the Americans' fire.

The surviving Cong had no sooner returned to their original position by the fence when the bombs exploded and lifted the massive building high up into the air where it just disintegrated into a cloud of rubble. Sergeant Trinh flashed a grim smile of satisfaction at a job well done. Now he could turn his attention back to Division 22.

IN THE BLINK of an eye the brand new four-story barracks had been transformed into a thirty-foot high pile of bricks. No one organized the survivors. There was no need. Those who were able knew what must be done and set to work at once. Cries and muffled shouts for help rose eerily from the wreckage. With no tools the men dug frantically while their shredded hands bled, and even then kept digging down through the debris, trying with every ounce of strength they possessed to reach the soldiers who had been buried. All of them held fast to the same thought, "I will not stop until everyone has been accounted for."

Some of the trapped men had been alive after the explosion, but died before the rescuers could pull them out. A combat medic set up a makeshift hospital. One man, smaller than the rest, crawled through the rubble pulling out men and bodies. It was thirty-six hours before the last casualty was located and removed.

The truckers from the 140th Transportation Detachment were hit the hardest. Every last one of them had either been killed or wounded. Twenty-two of them died in the blast, and the other twenty-one were so badly injured they had to be evacuated stateside.

Another victim was an Army Ranger. After his memorial service one of the pallbearers, a Special Forces Sergeant, explained to a small cluster of friends, “It ain’t a well known fact yet, but there’s a full time war going on over there. I’m afraid the American people are going to see a lot more funerals before it’s over.”

THE SERGEANT’S WORDS were truly prophetic. 58,220 more of America’s precious sons and daughters would be killed, and another 303,644 would be wounded by the Viet Cong before the Vietnam War finally came to its disastrous conclusion.



CHAPTER 8

SUBIC BAY WAS designated as an R and R, or “Rest and Relaxation” Port, but no one ever did that there. Instead, they chased women, fought, and drank like fish with a single mindedness that would have been admirable had it been directed toward almost any other endeavor. The Hawke’s crew was certainly no exception, and as she steamed back across the puddle to Vietnam, her thoroughly exhausted troops took advantage of the two day trip to rest up.

IN RETALIATION FOR the Qui Nhon raid and another Communist attack on an airbase outside of Pleiku, the United States launched “Operation Rolling Thunder,” which was an unprecedented bombing campaign to punish North Vietnam. On Yankee Station, the USS Ranger, Coral Sea, and Hancock were unleashing all of their mighty airpower to cripple the North and disrupt their supply lines to the South. As Air Force General Curtis LeMay declared, “They’ve got to draw in their horns and stop their aggression or we’re going to bomb them back into the stone age.”

For the next two weeks the Hawke and five other tin cans chased those flattops around like a pack of hounds on the scent of turbo charged rabbits. The duty was unrelenting and the maneuvering was so tightly choreographed it was a miracle there were no collisions. Unfortunately though, collisions did occur. Out on Yankee Station in 1969, the destroyer Frank E. Evans was cut in half by the Australian carrier HMAS Melbourne. Seventy-four of the Evans' crew were "Lost at Sea" and until this very day, the U.S. Department of Defense refuses to admit they were casualties of the Vietnam War.

On day number fifteen, Captain Foley received special orders: the Seventh Fleet was mobilizing a new mission involving the Vietnamese Junk Forces and the U.S. Navy. Known as "Operation Market Time," its objective was to eliminate those of the enemy who used boats to smuggle weapons and personnel into the south. If successful, the Cong would be forced to use the inland Ho Chi Minh Trail; a much easier location to monitor and raid. Three destroyers were chosen: the Hawke, the Black, and the Higbee. Each was assigned separate patrol areas along with specific allied partners with whom to coordinate.

The Hawke's Quartermasters set a course for Junk Force Division 22 in Qui Nhon. Everybody was glad to clear out. Since joining the Task Force, the squalls had been vicious, and for a full nine days the swells never stopped crashing over the bridge. The apes were constantly soaked and mold was beginning to grow in the nooks and crannies of their bodies. Below decks, evidence of sea-sickness was rampant. The almost palpable smell of vomit was everywhere. The Hawke's crew felt like they were on an endless, out of control roller coaster ride. Not so for the carriers. To the annoyance of their escorts they rode the storm tossed waters like logs floating on a small pond.

The combination of colossal whitecaps, relentless rain, and heavy fog made lookout duty impossible. The range of vision was nil. Without radar the ship would have been in serious trouble.

As they climbed the ladder to assume their watch, Zack said to Howell, "We'ah gonna need windshield wipahs tonight."

“Nah, we need goggles. This ain’t a destroyer anymore, it’s a friggin’ submarine.”

The Task Force was lucky. Thus far none of the returning pilots had to ditch their jets. That wasn’t to say they all made it back home safely, but those who bailed out over land had slightly better odds of staying alive than those forced to do so over the puddle. In conditions such as these, chances of survival for anyone going into the deep, from either plane or ship was zero.

The Hawke steamed westward through the night, and as she traveled, the waves finally began to subside but at the same time the intensity of the deluge and fog increased significantly.

Howell and Zack were out on the bridge wings with their useless binoculars, and although Howell had been joking, Zack thought to himself, goggles weren’t such a bad idea. They were drenched right down to their goose-fleshed shivering skin, and were suffering from a lookout condition known as “CSS” or “Can’t See Shit.” The OOD knew land wasn’t more than ten miles away. Radar showed it big and bold, and the ocean had been mud-brown from coastal run-off for quite some time now. He needed visual confirmation and was getting more than a little frustrated by the lack of visibility and the silence of his lookouts. When they were five miles offshore, as per standing orders, he sent the messenger to wake the Captain.

Chief Quartermaster Dodson and the XO were busily changing charts and two of their seamen were milling about wearing sound-powered phones. Both were obviously disinclined to trade the warm comforts of the bridge for the cold downpour outside. The chief unceremoniously booted his slackers out into the storm. They reluctantly went to their respective wings and uncovered the peloruses, preparing to shoot bearings at the first sight of Vietnam; if that is, they could ever see it through this soup. They no sooner jacked in their phones and established communications with the navigators when they heard Howell report “Landfall” after the clouds lifted just enough for him to see the mountains of the mainland.

QUINHON BAY was deep and wide, but entering its inner harbor always challenged the Hawke's shiphandlers. Junk Force Division 22's headquarters was upstream from the opening, and it required a great deal of skill to reach the anchorages there.

To gain access, vessels had to follow an extremely tight, twisting channel, and passing through it with a destroyer was like trying to thread a needle with a shoelace. Making it even more difficult were strong tides, powerful river currents, and random patches of shallow water. On any given day, the Hawke drafted between twelve and fifteen feet. Running aground would make her a sitting duck until the slowly changing tide or the ship's massive turbines could extricate her. On the plus side, the protected harbor was the perfect place for a military installation because it was naturally defensible and no one was able enter or leave it without Division 22's knowledge or consent.

AS THE SHIP slowly slipped into the bay, Eastman called out The Special Sea and Anchor Detail. When they were relieved, he and Zack ran down to the forecabin. Chief McCoy and Ensign Wells were already there with a phone talker who was connected to the bridge. When his crew was in place, the chief reported that they were manned and ready. The OOD ordered them to make all preparations to drop the starboard hook. The chief told Eastman, "Go below and make sure the anchor chain'll run free."

"Aye, Chief."

A few minutes later he returned, "Everythin's okay down theyah, Chief."

McCoy looked over his shoulder at the snipe who operated the anchor windlass, an enormous steam driven winch, "Set the brake and disconnect the wildcat."

"Set the brake and disconnect the wildcat, aye, Chief." The wildcat engaged the anchor chain. When the snipe disengaged it, the anchor was now free to drop when the brake was released. Then the chief looked over at two seamen standing in between the windlass and the hawespipe, and said, "Disconnect the aft chain stopper." The smaller of the two men immediately

pulled a toggle out of the pelican hook on the end of the stopper, which acted like the safety on a gun. When he did so, he grabbed a lanyard spliced to the pelican hook. Then the larger of the two, armed with a long handled maul took a long, hard swing and knocked the bail off the stopper. While he did this, the smaller deck ape gave a good hard yank on his lanyard and between the two of them they managed to open the hook, disconnecting it from the anchor chain.

Now the only thing keeping the mammoth several ton anchor from dropping was the windlass' brake and the one remaining chain stopper.

The chief then instructed Zack to shackle the anchor buoy line to the anchor. When he had done so, the chief told the phone talker, "Tell the bridge the anchor is ready fer lettin' go."

The rain had finally stopped, the fog was lifting, and the seas were flat. The ship began carefully maneuvering through the channel into the harbor and for the first time since coming onto the forecastle, Zack had a couple of minutes to look around. Having spent the past two weeks in a gray, zero visibility storm bubble, the first thing he noticed was how vibrantly green everything was. Once inside the basin, the ship turned sharply to the west and to his left he could see Junk Division 22's long concrete headquarters building and their docks and the several run down looking junks tied to them.

Up on the bridge wings, the Quartermasters were taking bearings at objects specified by the navigator, who was furiously plotting them and advising the OOD of the ship's distance to the anchorage. When they were in position, the OOD commanded the ship to back slow and gave the order to drop the hook.

The phone talker relayed the word to the chief who had his men stand well clear of the chain, and told his two deck apes, "Disconnect that forward stopper."

"Aye, Chief," they responded in unison, and they did.

He told Zack, "Throw the anchor buoy over the side," and he did.

The chief told the snipe, "Let go the brake," and he did.

The chain rattled loose, and in no time at all the hook hit the bottom at twenty feet. The links were color coded at fifteen-foot intervals and the phone talker kept relaying the length of anchor chain to the bridge as the ship slowly backed. When the OOD was satisfied with the depth, distance, and scope he ordered, "Pass the stoppers." The snipe on the windlass set his brake and the deck apes reconnected the stoppers to the anchor chain.

AFTER SECURING FROM The Special Sea and Anchor Detail, Zack had enough time for a quick breakfast before heading back up to the forecastle for Quarters. The Boatswain's Mates had several items to discuss: the motor Whaleboat needed to be put in the water, and a boat ladder had to be rigged. They informed the apes the ship would remain here for the next two days so the chiefs and division officers could be briefed by the U.S. Naval Advisory Team and the Vietnamese Junk Forces. Until their departure, a nighttime watch would be set to protect the perimeter of the ship. Eastman would make up and post the Watch Bill in the compartment.

Once the motor Whaleboat hit the water, there was a steady procession of officers coming and going throughout the day. Usually when at anchor, the boilers were shut down. But not now. Everyone knew what had recently happened to the nearby Army barracks, so the crew remained at a high level of readiness and stayed as close to their GQ stations as possible.

ZACK HAD THE midnight watch. He was issued a twelve gauge pump shotgun loaded with buckshot and ordered to shoot any VC swimmers attempting to climb onto the forecastle. Three other apes covered the rest of the ship. It was a dark night but the Junk Force base was well lit and surrounded with several impenetrable layers of concertina wire. He could see his Vietnamese counterparts wearing dungarees and their black berets, patrolling the docks with M-14s. Each side of the compound had a tall guard tower and both were partially obscured by shadows. Although Zack

couldn't see them all that well, he thought it was likely they were armed with .30 or .50 caliber Browning Machine Guns. It was a formidable set up and it was obvious they took their security here very seriously, as indeed they should.

Rumors had flown around the ship about these sailors. They were reputed to be every bit as ruthless as the Viet Cong. They fought under a black flag with no quarter asked and no quarter given. Prisoners were never taken by either side. If captured, their Sat Cong tattoos were cut out of their living flesh before they were tortured and killed. After the war was over the Junk Force sailors were rounded up and sent to Communist Re-education Camps. When these tattoos were discovered, they were forced to cut them out of themselves with knives.

THE NEXT DAY the weather finally cleared and the apes got a real eyeful at Quarters. The Song Kon River had carved out this snug little harbor, and the calm waters within were like sparkling emeralds mirroring back the steep green mountains that now encircled the destroyer.

After the troops were dismissed, the silence of the morning was broken by the sounds of aircraft engines. Soon a squadron of three Air Force UC-123 Providers came in low over the mountains flying side by side. They were each trailing thick streams of what at first looked like vapor, but upon further observation it appeared they were spraying a liquid. "What the hell?" said Dixon to the chief. McCoy shrugged and turned to Ensign Wells, who said, "No big deal. It's a new chemical defoliant called Agent Orange. They briefed us on it yesterday. It's harmless to human and animal life, but it's going to wipe out all of the vegetation around Qui Nhon and this harbor. When those planes are done, we'll be able to see the VC coming from a couple of miles away. There won't be any ambushes around here again."

The specially rigged Providers spent the rest of the day soaking the jungle with their cargos of poison. During the war, the United States laid down 19,395,369 gallons of Agent Orange on over 30,305 square miles of land.

The boatswains took advantage of the improving weather. The Captain approved a freshwater wash down for the salt encrusted ship and the apes turned-to scrubbing and spraying. The petty officers went over the boat davit lines with a fine tooth comb, replacing anything that looked even questionable. They had been given the word: the motor Whaleboat was going to get a serious workout in the coming months.

Most of the Deck Force came off farms and had firsthand experience with herbicides and pesticides. After knock-off, the chief pointed at the planes and said to Slocum, “How many thousands a gallons a that shit yew figure they sprayed on the jungle today?”

“I don’t know, Chief, but I do know ain’t nothin’ gonta grow here ‘til long after Kingdom Come.”

“Yew got that right, Darnell.”

The chief had been in the service long enough to know there was no logic to how things were done. When something was urgently required, the powers that be would lock their purses down tight, and the troops would have to do without. The next day though, they might throw a million dollars at some picayune thing that a couple of bucks would normally buy. The chief ruefully thought that was the case here. Use a couple a thousand gallons when one would do the job. He quickly put these thoughts aside. Nothing he could do about it, and there were things that needed doing.

Zack had Guard Duty from 2000 to 2400 and he hadn’t been on watch more than a half-an-hour when it started raining again, a slow drizzle at first but an hour later, the heavens opened up in earnest. Here we go again, he thought. The messenger came around with rain gear for the sentries, but by then it was too late. They were once again soaked to the skin and chilled to the bone.

DOWN IN THE ENGINE SPACES, Chief Engineering Officer Lieutenant Rollins said to his assistant. “What the hell is the Captain thinking, Borg?”

Borg was clearly not happy with Rollins' tone of voice or the content of this conversation, but was all too familiar with his boss' concerns. Rollins continued in a loud, belligerent voice, "We've been here two days with orders to keep the boilers lit, and then he authorizes a freshwater wash down? What's the matter with him? With all this mud we both know we can't make freshwater here, but the way things stand if we don't, we'll be lucky if we can limp back out to sea tomorrow. And what the hell does Foley know about it anyway?" Rollins continued in full rant now, "He came up through weapons, not engineering. He thinks we're magicians down here!"

Borg tried to calm him down, "I've had Bates and his gang report to me every hour, on the hour, and yes, the reserve potable water tanks are dangerously low, but he's sure we'll have enough to clear the harbor in the morning."

"Very well, Mr. Borg, but the second, and I mean the very second we're out of here, you start desalinating big time, and you better just hope it doesn't come out looking like coffee!"

"Will do sir, but look at the bright side, with all this rain, the river here is just about at full flood and the salt content's already low, so it shouldn't take us long to top our tanks off. The water's nearly fresh already."

AT 0800, the Special Sea and Anchor Detail was piped out. The Hawke weighed anchor, and went out on her first patrol in the South China Sea.



CHAPTER 9

LIEUTENANT GIANG DUC BA was a Junk Force “Liaison Officer” from Division 22, and he received orders to report aboard the *Hawke* while she was anchored in Qui Nhon. It would be his job to advise which vessels to board and search, and act as translator while doing so. His English was impeccable. Two years earlier he had graduated from UCLA with a degree in Political Science. Although he could have remained in the United States, he felt strongly about returning home to drive the Communists out of his country. His family was from Saigon and they were well-to-do owning an import/export business.

He was grateful to have been chosen for this duty even though he was billeted in an undersized cramped cabin that he shared with another officer. After floating around the South China Sea on the smallest of junks for weeks on end, this assignment was more like a vacation on a cruise ship. The food here was plentiful, and best of all, since his return home, he had desperately missed and craved American tobacco; so fragrant, so sweet, not at all like the harsh, stinky stuff here in Vietnam. On the *Hawke* it was abundant,

and he could smoke as much of it as he wanted. Surely the gods of war were smiling down upon him.

In his two years of service with the Junk Forces, Giang had inspected every conceivable kind of vessel, and had developed a sixth sense for when something was wrong. There was always some kind of a tell. Vietnam was a country of a hundreds accents. Most of the smugglers were from the north which became readily apparent to anyone hearing them speak. They could no more hide their place of origin than Zack could convince Chief McCoy he had been born in Alabama, so they routinely brought along someone from the south to do the talking in case they were stopped.

The Americans were going to have to catch on fast. Even though the junks they would be dealing with were much smaller than destroyers, the Cong often chose to go out in a blaze of glory. They were always armed to the teeth and were well aware of what would happen to them if they fell into the hands of their enemies. A swift ending in a hail of bullets was preferable to being snuffed out by slow torture. Both sides knew that being taken alive ordinarily resulted in death.

Earlier in the conflict, the Communists had simply loaded their freighters up to the gunnels with arms and sent them down the coast. The South Vietnamese Navy didn't have the wherewithal to challenge them. That all changed when the United States entered the war and commenced providing advisers and equipment. The turning point came last year down in Vung Ro Bay when a VC freighter was caught at the crack of dawn unloading munitions on a beach. In the ensuing battle, the ship and cargo were destroyed and the entire crew was killed.

The situation was like a never ending game of chess played by two evenly matched grandmasters. The military planners in Hanoi were devious and adaptable, and after the debacle at Vung Ro Bay, they began sending loads in smaller vessels. When the Junk Forces detected the pattern, the Cong immediately changed tactics. And so it went: move, countermove, and move again. However, the one big difference here was: there were no rules.

The most important tool Giang brought aboard with him was the “Junk Blue Book.” This was the Junk Force’s bible. Prior to joining the Marine Corps, its author, Colonel Marion Dalby, had been a highly accomplished yachtsman and it was only natural that he would be fascinated by the vast number and variety of vessels he observed cruising offshore. He estimated that on any given day there were between forty, to sixty thousand of them in an area extending from the Demilitarized Zone or “DMZ,” which was the frontier separating South Vietnam from its northern Communist neighbor, down to the Cambodian border.

The Colonel quickly realized the strategic importance of being able to prioritize which junks posed a probable threat versus those more likely to be friendly. So in the early 1960s, with his Command’s blessings he spent two years talking to owners and visiting boat yards and boat makers. When he had gathered enough information, he and a team assigned to him put together the Blue Book, which ended up being an indispensable guide to all of the junks made in Vietnam and her neighboring countries. It included photographs, descriptions of construction materials, locations of manufacture, sail sizes and types, and for those that had them, engine sizes and types. It also described what they were used for.

ARMED WITH HIS experience, his intelligence, his finely honed sixth sense, his indomitable courage and his Blue Book, Lieutenant Giang was a formidable young officer and a valuable asset to any command.

THE DESTROYER CRUISED about four miles out at fifteen knots and the apes, whether working on deck or standing watch, had a real good look at the Vietnamese coastline. It was a beautiful land. The green jungle-covered mountains went on forever and ran down to the fairest sandy beaches any of them had ever seen. The blue waters were full of junks of various sizes and shapes, nearly all with square white sails, either fishing or on some kind of errand.

The roads in Vietnam were terrible, and it was not a wide country so the sea was used more often than not for personal transportation. While standing lookout, Howell had noticed that every vessel regardless of size had eyes painted on the bows. When Giang came out on the wing for what seemed to be his third smoke in half an hour, Howell asked him about it.

Giang took a long pull off of his unfiltered Camel and thought a minute before he replied, "Most of the junks you see are much older than they look, and have been owned by the same families for many generations. Some of these people never leave them, have never set foot on land. They believe that spirits reside in all things animate and inanimate. They believe there is another universe here with us they cannot see, but they believe in it nonetheless. As you no doubt know by now, the sea can be a hostile place, sometimes a place of grave danger. These boats often must travel great distances in hazardous conditions. They believe there are spirit guides aboard, and most will keep shrines to honor them.

"So to answer your question: without eyes, how could these boats see in the dark? How could they see through fog and rain? How could they keep their owners safe from harm?" Giang finished his cigarette, stubbed it out in a butt can and went back into the bridge, leaving Howell who was from a place where they definitely didn't paint eyes on their boats or keep shrines on them for the spirits, with something to think about.

The Captain and Giang had met back at Division 22. Each instinctively liked what they saw: Giang thought Captain Foley was a tall, John Wayne-type American, and the Captain thought Giang was one tough and savvy little sailor who knew his business. Foley was smart enough to know he was a rookie at this kind of warfare, and even though there was a great difference in age and rank between the two, he intended for his officers and crew to follow his new Liaison Officer's advice to the letter.

After paying his respects to the older man, Giang requested a meeting with the "Visit and Search Party." The Captain agreed, and had the XO set it up on the mess decks in an hour's time.

And exactly one hour later the boat crew assembled. Say what you like about the Navy, but they can always be counted on to be punctual. The boarding officer was Lieutenant Hammond, the ship's Weapons Officer. Boatswain's Mate Third Class Eastman as coxswain was in charge of running the boat. His bow and stern hooks were the hulking deck apes Schmidt and Ames. They were in charge of making fast to whatever needed making fast to, and pushing off whatever needed pushing off from. They both had an aura of suppressed violence which could be intimidating, especially to the much smaller Vietnamese. They were chosen simply because they were thugs. The boat was powered by an engine, and wherever there was machinery, the Navy always required a snipe, so also onboard was Machinist Mate Second Class Tuttle. He was another large sailor, who wasn't intimidated by the deck apes. Not a bit. The last member of the little group was Gunner's Mate Third Class Palmer, who had been chosen to be their body guard, and he intimidated the hell out of everybody.

Captain Foley sat unobtrusively in the back and Giang was honored by his presence.

Once the introductions were finished, Giang told them, "You must forget your American sense of fairness. We are fighting a ruthless enemy, an enemy who believes individual lives mean nothing. When faced with capture they will always choose death.

"I have searched thousands of vessels, from the smallest of fishing junks, right up to large Russian freighters, and the most important rule is to always remain vigilant. If something should go wrong and I begin to fire, you must follow my lead. You must not hesitate, for if you do, you will be killed. If I am unable to initiate an attack, but signal you to do so, then you must not falter. We do not have eyes in the back of our heads. We must now become those eyes for each other. For example: if you see weapons or explosives that I have not seen, then you must take the initiative and attack.

"When I say attack, I mean you must shoot to kill. It may be that the Viet Cong we are facing are men, women or children, but once the first

shot is fired it no longer matters. All are now the enemy and all must die. Remember: a child or a woman with a weapon will pull the trigger and kill you just the same as a man. If you cannot do this, if you cannot accept this duty, you must tell me now.” No one spoke. He gave them a few minutes of silence to think about what he had said.

In Vietnamese culture, teachers were held in a special place of respect. Not so in the American military. Here respect is never given, always earned. Giang knew that for this Boarding Party to succeed and for all to stay alive, he must now become teacher, role model, and mentor to these troops. He must earn their respect, and he must do it quickly. He lit up a Camel and pulled the fragrant smoke deeply into his lungs.

When no one spoke up or left, he continued, “You will be issued flak jackets. They will be uncomfortable, and yet you must wear them every time we are called out. They are made for shrapnel, not bullets, but if you are hit, they may still save your lives and enable you to continue fighting. Each of you will be issued forty-five automatic pistols. When we leave this ship, you will chamber a round and put the safeties on. We will bring along two Thompson submachine guns with fifty-round drum magazines. The gunner here will carry one, and the other will remain onboard the Whaleboat with the coxswain. They will each carry an extra drum.

“As we approach our target, Palmer will cover it with his Thompson. After we tie off, Eastman will cover Palmer as he boards, then Palmer will move the junk’s occupants so we can safely board away from his field of fire. Are we clear so far? Any questions?” Giang once again gave them several moments to think. When no one responded, he went on, “I know you are all the very best at what you do. That is why you have been chosen. Even so, I can assure you these missions will be challenging. Starting now, you are officially on call around the clock, and it is important that you get as much sleep whenever you can.” Giang smiled grimly and thought to himself, they’re going to find out this isn’t just WesPac, it’s The Wild West, Vietnam style. The Captain left quietly, also wearing a smile of his own. He thought

his first impression of Giang had been dead on: one tough and savvy little sailor who knows his business.

The Captain was on the bridge and Giang requested permission to speak with him. They discussed ship handling procedures, strategies, and fields of covering fire with the Brownings during the coming searches.

The Boarding Party members took Giang's advice and hit their racks, but the apes didn't have that option. Now in addition to standing bridge watches, regular working hours, UNREP, and General Quarters, every time a junk needed to be searched, they'd have to be on hand too, because they provided the muscle required to get that boat in and out of the water.

AT 2000 HOURS, Lieutenant Giang found what he was looking for: two fishing junks in close proximity to each other, riding low in the water, but not fully loaded. He knew without looking at the Blue Book that these were not Cong smugglers, but they would serve his purposes well. After a short talk with the OOD, the Boatswain of the Watch was ordered to pipe out "Away the Boat."

Down in the First Division compartment the apes were flinging themselves out of their racks, cursing, groaning, grabbing their dungarees, and running for the 01 deck where the boat was kept. The Boarding Party was already there waiting. Giang gave Eastman a small, heavy gym bag, and told him, "Put this somewhere safe and dry where you can get it quickly, should we have need of its contents."

With more than a little curiosity, Eastman stowed it away.

LOWERING OR HOISTING aboard the twenty-six foot long, sixty-five-hundred pound motor Whaleboat with radial davits required a minimum of twenty-five men, and a half-hour of sweaty, back-breaking labor. Both davits were made of heavy steel and shaped like eighteen foot tall inverted capital letter J's which could turn or pivot on their bases. They stood outboard, about four feet in from both ends of the boat, blocking it from being put

directly into the sea. Pulleys on the top of each davit were connected with line to sturdy hooks built into the boat's bow and stern.

First, the motor Whaleboat had to be freed from the restraining straps that secured it to the ship. Next, it was raised just high enough to clear the deck. Then using block and tackle by hand, both davits were swung this way and that, while the boatswains bellowed profanity-filled instructions to their troops, and the boat was slowly maneuvered outward until it was hanging over the side, ready to be lowered with a capstan.

EVEN THOUGH the seas and skies were pitch black, the junks were vividly illuminated by the signalmen's powerful beams, which punched blindingly bright tunnels of light through the contrasting darkness of the night. The Whaleboat plowed its way through the choppy waters, leaving behind a silvery bioluminescent wake caused by small planktonic life that glowed when roiled or disturbed.

Making their approach, Giang, using a bullhorn, loudly gave orders to those on the junk, and they assembled on the rocking deck as instructed. Once alongside, Palmer, wearing a flak jacket and armed with his Thompson, quickly jumped aboard as planned. Lieutenants Hammond and Giang followed next and examined the captain's paperwork which was genuine and in order.

The forty-foot junk was filled with a nauseating stench. Like the Philippines, there was no refrigeration here, so the people often fermented food to preserve it: in this case it was fish. All of the coastal vessels reeked of it. And that wasn't the only thing that stunk. The cargo area was a knee deep jumble of sea creatures, both great and small, and added its own unpleasant odor to the foul air.

This is what it's all about, thought Giang. It was a perfect training run for his green crew. The Cong liked nothing better than hiding munitions in cargos that no one in their right mind would ever want to go through; the stinkier and slimier, the better. Giang took a cursory but careful look into the

hold, and then ordered Schmidt and Ames to climb down with shovels and dig through the pile. As they reluctantly obeyed, it was all they could do not to barf. The variety of marine life in the confined space was incredible and some of it had obviously been here too long. What Giang had not told them, was that when the enemy used fishing junks they often put highly aggressive and venomous sea snakes in with the catch to discourage thorough searches.

The two apes shoveled their way through the outer edges first, and then moved into the center, tossing the fish back up to the sides. As they got closer to the bottom, every few minutes or so, Ames kept getting shocked. He couldn't figure out how or why, since there was no electricity on the boat. Every now and then, Schmidt would hear him give a strangled little curse. When they worked their way down to the deck, they both saw a gigantic electric ray that must have been ten feet across. Angry at its predicament, the unfortunate creature had enough voltage to transmit a strong electrical charge through the other fish and into Ames. Schmidt thought it was pretty funny and started to laugh, but Ames didn't see the humor in it at all, and threw a couple of good natured punches, which Schmidt easily dodged as he returned a few of his own.

While clambering back up into the fresh air, the apes saw that Lieutenants Giang and Hammond were engaged in an amiable conversation with the boat family: a husband, wife, their ten year old daughter, and her grandfather. They seemed remarkably at ease considering the circumstances. All were smoking the American cigarettes that Lieutenant Giang had brought along to "win their hearts and minds." Even the little girl lit up and was delightedly puffing away right along with the grown-ups. The deck apes noticed that when the adults smiled, which they did often, their teeth and gums were stained a deep crimson. This was from chewing the mildly euphoric areca nut with betel leaves. Their boat was a wreck. They were dressed in little more than rags and were unmistakably poor. Being boarded and searched was the price they paid for fishing these waters, and the fishing was always good here, they explained. Besides, they had nothing to hide.

They had never been this close to a mighty U.S. destroyer before and were most impressed with its power and size. They were also impressed that Giang, a Vietnamese National, was part of their crew, and a leader besides, and they kowtowed to him as they would to any of superior station.

Once Schmidt and Ames had finished inspecting the load, the lieutenants gave the family chocolate, some canned goods, and several packs of cigarettes, thanked them for their cooperation, received their thanks in return, then disembarked and motored over to the next junk. This was a repeat of the first: cooperative family, papers in order, cargo clear of contraband. After giving away additional cigarettes and other goodies they returned to the Hawke at 2300. When the deck apes finished bringing them and their boat safely back aboard, those with the mid-watch ran up to the bridge for another sleepless night.

Lieutenant Giang asked his crew to meet him again in the mess decks in forty-five minutes, giving Ames and Schmidt time to shower and change out of their malodorous, fish scale encrusted dungarees. At the appointed time, they were all there, drinking coffee, smoking cigarettes, and waiting for the Vietnamese lieutenant.

GIANG LOOKED THEM OVER and said, "You men did an outstanding job tonight, and you should be proud of yourselves. You will soon find that no two junk searches are ever quite the same, and most will proceed without incident because the peasants that live and work on these deadly waters are not political. They have no time for it. They are too busy trying to feed their families, but the Communists have eyes and ears everywhere and are always ready to enslave and blackmail those they find vulnerable. For example: a fisherman may have relatives living in North Vietnam that the VC have located, and will now use as hostages to force him into smuggling weapons or personnel down into the south.

"The danger to us is that you may come to regard these uneventful searches as tedious, and as a result become careless or negligent in your

duties. That must not happen. Each of you must always remain on guard. Each of you must always watch for that which is unexpected. If one hundred searches go routinely, you must beware of the next, because it is only a matter of time before we cross paths with the Viet Cong, and when we do, you must be prepared.”

Out of courtesy, Giang asked Lieutenant Hammond if he would dismiss the crew and then they both went up to the bridge to be debriefed by Captain Foley and the XO. When finished, the Captain told Hammond to stay behind and informed him that although he was officially the boarding officer, Giang was to be in charge of the inspections and he, Hammond, was to speedily provide any assistance the Vietnamese lieutenant required of him.

AS SOON AS the two officers left the mess decks, the enlisted members of the Boarding Party debriefed themselves. Giang didn't know it, but he had already earned their respect. The crew saw that he was a natural leader, and knew exactly what he was doing. After tonight, they were willing to follow him through the gates of hell.

THE NEXT DAY the clouds were heavy and dark, the seas and winds running high, and the rain poured down in continuous sheets. The weather directly impacted fishing and shipping activity on the South China Sea; when it was severe, those without a pressing need rarely ventured forth from safe havens. The Hawke continued steaming in a southerly direction five or six miles parallel with shore through the brown coastal waters, and there was no junk traffic to be seen anywhere.

The Hawke was low on food and fuel. They had been out of milk for days now, and the cereal had weevils in it, lots of weevils. They're protein, Zack thought. He had discovered it wasn't so bad if you used water as a milk substitute and didn't look directly into the bowl. The shore bases in Vietnam were far and few between and had their own supply problems, so they were unable to offer any help. The Hawke checked in with the Seventh

Fleet and made arrangements to rendezvous with the USS Aludra for food, and the USS Platte for fuel.

CONDITIONS FOR underway replenishment were terrible. Large choppy waves and blinding rain made it a wet, miserable business. Just when the Hawke finished taking on oil at her forward station, the Platte yawed to port and the destroyer desperately maneuvered to avoid collision. As the distance between them widened, the fuel hose tore in half and the lines still connecting the two ships together stretched out beyond their breaking point and snapped with the sharp sounds of rifle fire, briefly becoming giant lethal whips whistling through the air in search of someone to maim or kill. While those on deck ducked for their lives, the massive steel cable yanked its attachment plate out of the Platte's fuel station and went over the side. The Hawke speedily broke away, dragging the whole mess right behind her. Luckily pumping had already secured so there was no spillage, and miraculously, no one was injured, or thrown overboard. Everyone working on those UNREP stations was wet, cold, angry, and more than a little shaky. But most of all, they were very glad and somewhat surprised to be alive. The forward station's riggers had no sooner disconnected the Platte's broken wreckage and heaved it into the sea, when the Hawke took station behind the Aludra and began her second approach of the day.

The prevailing mood wasn't a whole lot more cheerful on the bridge than it was down on the high-line station. Palmer was furious. The Officer of the Deck, Lieutenant Moretti, who because of his lofty attitude was held in low esteem by the deck ape tribe, had thoroughly trashed him out, ripped him up one side and down the other blaming him for the whole thing. He was right to a certain extent. Palmer had seen the mammoth ship coming towards them and without waiting for orders he instinctively reacted and took matters into his own hands. God forbid an enlisted man should ever do such a thing, he thought. Nevertheless, he moved the Hawke out of harm's way before Moretti could say so much as a word. There just wasn't time.

Better to part a rig than to collide with an oiler in these seas. The OOD didn't see it that way, but on the other hand, after he finished chewing him out, he didn't order him off the helm either.

When the *Hawke* pulled alongside the *Aludra*, everyone involved in the transfer was focused. Right there. No other extraneous thoughts in anyone's minds. No room for it. Concentrate and do your damn job. Both ships were rolling badly, the rain was unrelenting, and every now and then a thick spray of seawater would blow up over the station giving the apes a good mouthful of salt as they wiped their constantly dripping faces. Once the Highline Station was set up, the loads came over swinging wildly, swinging dangerously. When they hit the deck, the apes swarmed all over them, holding the loaded pallets down with the weight of their bodies as the riggers released them from the wire just as quickly as they could, and then passed the stacked crates onto a human conveyor belt of waiting hands and arms. It was with much exhaustion and relief when the work was finally finished and the detail was secured.

WHILE BREAKING AWAY from the supply ship, the *Hawke* received a priority message. After reading it, Captain Foley immediately set a course for Junk Force Division 21 in Nha Trang where he had been ordered to attend a meeting concerning changes in "Operation Market Time" protocols.

Early the next morning the only remnants of the storm were an overcast sky and occasional gusty winds. Soon after the sun came up the lookouts sighted Hon Tre, the largest of the group of islands protecting the inlet that housed the Junk Force compound. Most of these islands were nothing more than vertical stone pillars rising straight up from the water to the sky like jagged fangs growing from the blue gums of the sea. Here the Song Kai River ran down from the interior highlands and, over the eons, had cut a deep channel through the rocky coastal mountains, forming a small harbor where it met the salt. The main part of town and the base were a short distance upstream.

The Hawke carefully navigated around the giant obelisk-like islands and entered Nha Trang Harbor. Two other destroyers, the Black and the Mahan, were already there for the conference, and a swarm of junks crowded the little basin as they traveled up and down the dirty river. Instead of anchoring, the Captain chose to “heave-to.” He kept the bridge watch on duty, and had the OOD keep the ship in place by using the engines. The Junk Force Headquarters was similar to Qui Nhon’s. Alongside its well-worn wharves was the usual collection of unremarkable junks, and behind that was an immense concrete building with a multitude of high tech antennas all over the roof. The whole complex was protected by rolls of concertina wire and guard towers armed with .50 Caliber Browning Machine Guns on all four corners.

Nha Trang was on the opposite bank about a quarter of a mile further upstream. The Song Kai paralleled the coast for the first few miles creating a narrow spit of sand, and the town faced the sheltered waters of the river rather than the open sea. Many of the buildings were on bamboo stilts overlooking the narrow harbor and all of them had docks which were jam-packed with hundreds of overloaded sampans tied to one another forming an enormous floating market. Their owners were busily hawking off a wide array of goods and food products, both cooked and raw, from all over Southeast Asia. The crowd of customers was large and eager, most of whom were wearing slightly shabby but brightly colored clothing: either loose-fitting suits resembling pajamas, or Ao Dais, which were tight-fitting long silk tunics worn over pants. Just about everyone had on conical straw hats to protect themselves from the hot tropical sun, and they carried woven baskets for their purchases.

The boatswains were called out to set an armed perimeter watch, put the Whaleboat in the water, and rig a boat ladder. As soon as that was accomplished, a group of officers including the Captain and Lieutenant Giang, went over to the Surveillance Center, which was in the same building as Junk Division 21.

The warm wind pleasantly blowing downstream brought the sounds of the market and the odors of Nha Trang to the Hawke. Standing watch on the forecastle with shotgun in hand, Zack was fascinated by his surroundings. There was much for him to see in the busy harbor and he enjoyed listening to the distant murmur of the crowd's Babel of voices. He also thought the town had its own distinctive fragrance. Yup, there was the same underlying scent of sewage as Olongapo, but the river, the sea, the pungent cook smoke, the food and fish added their own aromas to the mix and it was by no means an unpleasant smell. He also couldn't help but notice all of the dead and dying brown vegetation surrounding the base, and knew the UC-123 Providers had sprayed their cargoes of Agent Orange here just like they had in Qui Nhon.

THE U.S. NAVY maintained Coastal Surveillance Centers in Nha Trang, Da Nang, An Thoi, and Qui Nhon. The South China Sea was routinely patrolled by P-3 Orion Aircraft which were long-range turbo props based out of the Philippines and Thailand. Their pilots reported any shipping activity they observed to these Centers who would assign surface vessels to investigate. Admiral Blackburn noticed that "Operation Market Time" was highly effective but seriously short-handed, so he assigned five other destroyers to the group. He then divided the Vietnamese coast into eight designated coverage areas, and the Hawke's new beat was from Nha Trang to Da Nang.

SEVERAL HOURS LATER the Captain and his entourage came back and the destroyer got underway. They had orders to inspect a freighter steaming south about ten miles offshore. There was nothing overtly suspicious about it, but all shipping in Vietnam's territorial waters was routinely scrutinized.

THE FOLLOWING DAY dawned bright and sunny. The wind had slackened off a bit, though the waters were still rough. At 1043 the target ship

was sighted. It was an Israeli freighter bound for Australia. The boarding team was sent over through the choppy seas, and found all of her papers to be in order. As long as she wasn't putting into any Vietnamese ports there was no need to go through her cargo. Schmidt and Ames sighed in relief. Giang tactfully suggested to the first officer, that if they didn't want to put up with the inconvenience of being stopped and possibly searched, then perhaps they should stay out beyond the twelve mile limit.

The Whaleboat returned, was hoisted aboard and the Hawke headed in closer to shore, steaming north toward Da Nang.

THE DISTANCE FROM Nha Trang to Da Nang was about three-hundred-fifty miles and between the two cities were countless islands, inlets and bays. The Cong knew every nook and cranny. This was, after all, their country, and it was a smuggler's paradise. The Cong had spies on land and sea. While the Hawke swept through her patrol area, she was closely monitored by the enemy who tried to discern any pattern to her movements.

WITH THE IMPROVEMENT in the weather, boat traffic was back to normal. Giang and the OOD were on the bridge matching up junks in their field of view with the Blue Book. Zack was port lookout and Howell was on starboard. The ship was about three miles offshore still steaming north. Just coming over the horizon about seven miles dead ahead was a large motorized sampan, probably fifty or sixty feet long with some kind of a high deckhouse or shelter on the stern. Both lookouts saw it at the same time, and Zack called it in first: "Bridge, port lookout. I have a large motorized cargo sampan dead ahead, seven miles out heading our way. Wait. Belay that. She is altering her course shoreward."

"Bridge aye, port lookout."

Upon hearing the news Giang quickly grabbed a pair of binoculars, and did a double take. He didn't need the Blue Book to know this vessel had been made in Hanoi. It may have been running down the coast taking

advantage of the bad visibility and been caught out in the open now that the weather had broken, probably close to her destination, and getting sloppy, thought Giang. His heart rate picked up as he got a satisfying jolt of adrenaline. Giang smiled. He liked adrenaline almost as much as he liked American cigarettes. When he relayed the sampan's origin to OOD Lieutenant Connolly, many things happened simultaneously: the Captain was notified, Chief Dodson was told to get his best chart for this section of coast, and General Quarters was sounded.

Howell didn't have far to go to his GQ station. As soon as he was relieved he crossed the bridge and took over from Zack, who ran down to the gun mount. As Howell was adjusting his headphones, Chief McCoy and Ensign Wells stepped out on the wing and began loading the fifty cal. Next came the Quartermaster to man the pelorus. A regular friggin' circus, Howell thought to himself.

The race was on. The Cong sampan was hauling to shore and the Hawke was putting on steam to intercept it. Then Howell watched it disappear. One minute it was there and the next it was gone. What he didn't know was that the sampan had entered the mouth of the Song Kruc River and was making a desperate run to reach water too shallow for the destroyer to follow. When the Hawke made the river's opening she came to a screeching halt, "Dodson," hollered the Captain, "How much water do we have in there?"

This was the sixty-four thousand dollar question. The chief knew rivers were always a tricky business. Sand bars moved, oxbows changed, debris and mud built up and broke down. Part of his job was making sure all of the charts were corrected monthly when the publication "Notice to Mariners" came out, but those modifications were always dicey. The entries were submitted by ships that found themselves in big trouble because the information on their charts was no longer accurate, or maybe it had just been flat out wrong in the in the first place. This was truly an "uh oh" moment, or more accurately an "oh-shit" moment for the chief. "It looks good Captain, but it is a river...." he said with a worried look on his face.

The Captain listened to what the chief hadn't said, turning a slightly darker hue, thought a moment, looked over at McCoy and said, "Put a man on the forecastle with a lead line, Chief."

"Aye, sir." He stuck his head into the bridge and said to the Messenger of the Watch, another of his deck apes, "Gelman, git yer ass over ta the starboard wing. Tell Chief Larson ta set yew up with a flak jacket, take a helmet and phone with yew, run up ta the boatswains locker, git yew a lead line, jack yer phone in on the forecastle and standby ta take soundin's. If yew take more than three minutes I'll personally kick yer ass all over this here ship!"

"Aye, Chief!" Gelman replied, and he was gone in an instant. It took closer to four minutes before the winded Messenger of the Watch checked in with the bridge phone talker. In the meantime, the Quartermasters were taking bearing after bearing; if the *Hawke* got stuck, she'd at least, by God, know where she was. The chart showed thirty feet of water for the next mile and a half. The river was about two hundred yards across, and the Captain went in at an audacious fifteen knots. The tide was incoming and about halfway there. If the ship did run aground, it wouldn't be long before she'd float off. They were gaining on their prey, which despite its battered appearance, was running faster than anyone had anticipated. Rounding a bend the Captain told his General Quarters OOD, "Keep her to the outside of the curves, Mr. Moretti. You will find the water there to be deeper."

"Aye, sir."

Palmer wasn't deaf, and he knew what to do without being told. That was his greatest strength but from time to time it was also his Achilles' heel. Moretti and Palmer had buried the hatchet after their little ordeal with the *Platte*. What Moretti hadn't told Palmer was that when they had secured from the Highline Detail, the Captain had followed him down to the wardroom where he was drinking coffee and shooting the breeze with several of his buddies. The Captain's face was beet-red and he was furious. His voice had been louder than a megaphone, and he displayed a vocabulary

of profanity that would have made Chief McCoy envious. It was the ass chewing of ass chewings, epic, even down to the flying spittle accompanying his raging words. The other junior officers sat there white-faced and slack-jawed, paralyzed with fear. All were sure the Captain was about to have a stroke. The thing they found astonishing about it was that he could care less about ripping apart the Platte's refueling station. Instead, he was infuriated that Palmer, an enlisted man, had read and corrected the situation before Moretti, who was an officer and the OOD! But in the aftermath, as with Palmer, Foley didn't boot him off the bridge. He knew Moretti could be an overbearing jerk, but he was also one of the best ship handlers in his stable, second only, it would appear, to Palmer!

Fire control locked onto the sampan, and Howell watched Mount fifty-one's twin guns perk up and track it like a hunting dog straining to get off its leash. The Captain was furious because the Rules of Engagement precluded him from firing on the enemy unless fired upon first. Nevertheless, he did not want them to get away because of a foolish regulation written by some useless desk jockey at Seventh Fleet Headquarters.

Okay, he thought, the Rules of Engagement might prevent me from blowing these Communist maggots up, but they don't prohibit a warning shot either. "Mister Moretti, put a round of Willy Peter over that sampan just as close as you can without actually hitting it."

"Aye, sir."

BOOM! The forward mount fired with a bright flash. The shell went screaming along its ear shattering trajectory barely passing over the top of the sampan, and then about a half mile further upstream, slammed into the bank with a brilliant explosion. Once released, the White Phosphorous' angry flames spread outwards, hungrily burning through all of the vegetation and then began devouring the very ground itself while thick dark smoke billowed up into the sky.

The Captain smiled grimly to himself. Although the Cong didn't stop, they certainly would not soon forget the Hawke.

Moretti slowed the ship and had Gelman start taking soundings by throwing the marked, weighted line in and calling the depths up to the bridge. At three fathoms the Captain stopped the ship. Giang implored him to put in the Whaleboat, but the Captain knew it would take too long to gather enough apes from their GQ stations to launch it. No, the sampan had won the race, and he was livid. He could just imagine the enemy Captain sitting safe and secure somewhere in the shallows laughing his ass off and shooting him the bird. It took all of Foley's willpower not to blow that sampan right out of the water, Rules of Engagement be damned!

Now that the chase was over, the Hawke found herself in waters so narrow she was forced to back out. As Howell looked down from his bridge wing, he saw the screws were churning up massive chunks of smelly black mud, and throwing it all over the sides and the fantail. He groaned and thought, hell, it'll take us days to get all that stinky crap off the decks.

Backing a ship is by far the most difficult maneuver for a conning officer and helmsman to accomplish. Normal rules do not apply, and once again Palmer found himself locked in a tremendous struggle with the wheel. Sometimes he thought he'd prevail, and other times he thought the river would. But in the end he and Moretti succeeded and managed not to run the destroyer aground or back her into the river banks. They were soon out at sea continuing their run up to Da Nang.

THE HAWKE'S EXPERIENCE with that sampan was not an isolated incident. Destroyers had never before been used in waters as shallow as they were in Vietnam. There were no guide books to turn to for help or advice, so ships like the Hawke had no choice but to improvise. The Seventh Fleet took note of this same scenario playing out again and again. The Cong quickly learned that if they could run far up enough into the rivers and canals, they and their cargos were home free. The Department of the Navy was faced with a new kind of war that required a new strategy and new equipment.

They commissioned the manufacture of patrol boats with fast motors and heavy weaponry designed specifically for rivers. Except for a few early prototypes, they weren't on hand for use in Vietnam until September of 1965. These "Swift Boats" and their sailors would become known as the "Brown Water Navy." What many fail to realize or recognize is that the destroyers and other ships used in "Operation Market Time" were actually the forefathers of the "Brown Water Navy." They were there first, and certainly saw more than their own fair share of action and brown, muddy water.

THE NEXT MORNING at Quarters as Zack stood on the forecandle; he thought he was going crazy. Way off in the distance he saw what looked like a man lying down on top of the sea. He nudged Howell who was standing next to him and pointed. Howell said, "What the hell..."

As the Boatswain's Mates assigned daily duties, the ship kept closing with this oddity, and finally they could see it was a man fishing with a handline on a makeshift raft that barely floated, drifting around these shark-infested waters six miles offshore. That was the beauty of being a deck ape, Zack thought. We see it all. With the exception of the navigators, deck officers and signalmen, no one else on the ship ever gets to see what we see. Look at the snipes. All they ever saw were bulkheads, dials, gauges, gears, and of course, the insides of their scorching hot boilers.

DA NANG WAS the Navy's largest overseas command and sat right at the junction of major rail, air, and highway routes. It supplied over two-hundred-thousand GI's with everything they needed to wage this war: beans, bullets, and body bags. Sooner or later, every naval ship in the Seventh Fleet, regardless of size, spent time in this port. When the Hawke approached land, the lookouts saw more ship traffic than they had since leaving San Diego, and noticed that the busy harbor, like Qui Nhon's, was well protected by surrounding mountains.

Although many ground troops were stationed here, not long before there had been an attack by multiple waves of Cong. After Marines drove them off it was discovered that one of the dead was a seemingly innocent thirteen year old boy who sold drinks on our side of the wire. In his pockets were sketches he had made of Marine defensive positions all around the base. This would not be the last time children were used by the Cong.

In reaction, the Air Force drenched the perimeter with Agent Orange. They never stopped, either. They kept on soaking it down right up until the end of the war. Fifty years later and still nothing is able to grow there.

The apes dropped the hook out in the harbor close to the heavy cruiser Canberra, and then put the Whaleboat in the water. After they set up the boat ladder, the Captain went calling on the Coastal Surveillance Center and Junk Force Division 23.



CHAPTER 10

SENIOR LIEUTENANT DIEP HUU BAO of the North Vietnam People's Navy was still shaken. He had been making this run for years, and had just committed an almost fatal error in judgment. The first four-hundred miles south from Hanoi had been easy enough, traveling through Cong controlled waters. When he reached the DMZ, he headed out into the deep as he always did. His sixty foot cargo sampan with its seventy-horse four-cylinder Yanmar engine could make it across the South China Sea if necessary, so going beyond the territorial limit wasn't a problem for him. The weather had been gloriously terrible with wondrously high waves, pounding rains, and a fantastic zero visibility fog, all combining to completely destroy the effectiveness of the White Devil's patrolling aircraft. Diep was a smuggler, and for him, the weather couldn't have been any better.

Getting through the Da Nang shipping lanes was not without risk. Diep had no way of knowing what types of U.S. warships he might encounter there, but he had noticed on past crossings that the enemy was usually focused on dashing into the vast friendly harbor or rushing off to their newly

assigned mission stations. This far offshore, junks were usually beneath their notice, plus, being way out at sea had the added benefit of putting him beyond the reach of his sworn enemies: the Junk Forces. Sooner or later though, he would have to return to land to rendezvous and unload. This was always the time of maximum danger.

Early that morning Diep had been faced with a choice: find a place to hole up for the day, or roll the dice and complete his mission in broad daylight. He had five sailors with him, and along with a large, heavy cargo of much needed munitions, he was carrying ten North Vietnam Army, or NVA, Special Forces Instructors who were being sent to the south to recruit and train new fighters.

This trip had been one of Diep's worst. There was absolutely no room on the sampan. She was low and heavy in the water, and had five-hundred-seventy miles to cover on punishing storm tossed seas. The decks were crammed with crates of ordnance and sea-sick soldiers were lying everywhere. From his point of view, the weather afforded them great cover. From the point of view of the debilitated men, it was the voyage from hell. Even before leaving the dock, they were throwing up all over. These were supposed to be North Vietnam's fiercest commandoes, Diep thought disgustedly, and yet here they were whimpering like frightened little children.

His well-conditioned sailors thought the incapacitated warriors were comical. In no time at all they were poking fun at their helpless cargo who in between bouts of violent vomiting, shot them poisonous looks. As stupid as the enraged troops were, their leader, Sergeant Banh, had made the obvious connection that if he allowed his group to massacre the sailors, then they too would perish in this devilish sea. The overlong trip on the overloaded sampan continued, with the dehydrated green grunts helplessly hating their mocking tormentors.

So when he finally made it within striking distance of his destination: even though the weather was clear as a bell, even though the visibility was endless, even though Diep's gut was screaming NO, he still wasn't sure. Do

we hide, or do we go? He knew this river had not been chosen randomly. It was positioned dead center between Junk Force Divisions 22 and 23. It was a virtual no-man's land which was rarely if ever patrolled. Hauling inanimate weapons of war was one thing, he thought, but hauling these whining landlubbers was quite another and he just wanted them off of his puke-encrusted sampan; the sooner the better. So Diep took the chance. He rolled the dice. On they went.

They had no sooner sighted the Song Kruc's mouth when his two look-outs began clamoring for his attention and pointing excitedly at something on the horizon. He looked in the direction they indicated and did a double take. He immediately saw a huge destroyer altering course and bearing down on them. His stomach lurched and his heart began to thump loudly in his chest. He hollered at the sailor in the deckhouse to take the seventy-horse diesel up to full speed. As he issued this command, the sergeant was issuing some of his own, ordering his men to open a crate of Rocket Propelled Grenades, or RPGs, and another of 50mm Mortars, to lock and load.

Diep's anger grew. He was in charge of this sampan and all who were on it. He turned and yelled, "Are you out of your mind?! If you attack, their 'Rules of Engagement' will permit them to kill us all. Your RPGs and mortars will be as effective against that iron-skinned beast as a flea attacking a tiger." He handed him a pair of binoculars. "Take a good look, Sergeant Banh, even now her guns are following our every move just waiting for any excuse to blow us out of the water. I am in command here. You and your squad are under MY authority. This is what we will do: I will make for the river with all speed and try to run them aground. If we fail to beat them to low water, we will land on the beach and make a break for it. Should it come to that, arm yourselves and my crew with as much as they can carry, but as long as we have a chance of escape, do not fire on that ship, DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?!"

Eyes downcast, with a slightly deferential bow, Sergeant Banh answered sullenly, "Yes, Comrade Lieutenant."

Diep looked up and saw blue skies, flat seas, bright sunshine, and puffy white clouds, and fatalistically thought to himself: such a beautiful day to die. Why had the smuggling spirits to whom he constantly honored, prayed, and lit incense to abandoned him? Where were the squalls, the fog, and the blinding rain that he implored of them and now needed so desperately? Why had he decided not to hide and wait for the protective mantle of nightfall and what in the great imp's name was that gray monster doing so close to shore?

If he managed to come out of this alive, his superiors in Hanoi needed to be informed as soon as possible. Maybe it was just a chance encounter with a dinky dau [crazy] enemy commander, however if these larger vessels were moving in toward the coast, changes in strategy would once again be required for future smuggling operations to succeed.

But now they were well up the brown river. The banks were thickly covered with dense green mangrove forests. Should they have to run for it, they would have excellent cover. He knew that once ashore the sergeant and his soldiers would take positions and futilely attempt to inflict what damage they could on the impregnable-looking ship, before being cut to pieces by her armor plated turrets. What fools.

Diep watched the Hawke cautiously slow at the entrance, and then to his growing astonishment and dismay saw her actually pick up speed. She seemed to leap into the river with her guns steadily aimed at them and reminded him of a giant shark stalking its prey. He shouted at his engineman, desperation straining his voice, "Nhanh hon! Nhanh hon! Our lives depend on it!"

"I've already got it running as fast as it can go, Captain!"

Then all hell broke loose. The White Devil Ship's cannon fired and they heard a scream like that of all the anguished souls confined to the pits of eternal torment as the shell passed closely over their heads. When it flew by it sucked all the air out of its wake creating a vacuum. For an instant no one could breathe. This was followed by typhoon like winds. It was here and

then gone in a heartbeat leaving their hair standing on end, their hats ripped off. Then it exploded in front of them. Green was instantly transformed to orange and they watched transfixed in horror as the flames consumed trees, brush, bushes; the entire bank was soon gone as the fire fanned out from its center. Diep felt the sampan slow. He howled at the engineman to push the throttle back down, but the engineman couldn't hear a word he said. In fact, he couldn't hear anything at all. Blood was dripping from his ears. As with many of the men, both his eardrums had been blown out. Diep quickly forced his way back to the wheelhouse, shoving shell shocked men out of his way and took over. The sampan resumed speed and kept running. He silently prayed his foe would not fire again. He wasn't sure they could survive another warning shot.

They came to the first bend, and were soon lost to the sight of the invaders. The first was soon followed by a second and the water finally began to shallow up. Even loaded as Diep's sampan was, her draft was only two-and-a-half feet, and he couldn't even guess how much water the destroyer drew. He was amazed at the enemy Captain's determination and nerve in choosing to pursue him into this river. But here he was in a cold sweat as the overload of adrenaline began washing out of his exhausted body. The sampan was now in about ten-feet of water moving upstream fast, leaving his frustrated adversary far behind.

Diep had one of his sailors relieve him, came out of the cramped shelter of the wheelhouse, bent down, picked up his conical straw hat, dusted it off and put it back on. The Vietnamese are not a demonstrative people, but while the sampan chugged upriver, the Captain, in his filthy black pajamas, turned and faced back in the direction from which they had come. As all onboard watched impassively, he raised both arms high over his head, and crossed two fingers on each of his hands in the Hawke's direction.

The Vietnamese are also a polite people, and this was their rudest gesture; ruder even than a westerner's one-finger salute. There was no hand clapping, no shouts of approval, no backslapping from the crew. That would

have been unseemly, but there was much grinning and nodding of heads in heartfelt agreement with their Captain's soundless message to the White Devil Ship.

Diep took a betel leaf and carefully wrapped an areca nut in it. Too bad I don't have some lime paste to go with it, he thought. He carefully put the rolled up wad in between his cheek and gums, just like a redneck would with a plug of tobacco. The Captain was a redneck, Vietnam style. He sighed with pleasure. Now that they had escaped the gray dragon he wasn't too worried. The further they pushed up the Song Kruc, the deeper they penetrated into the Cong heartland.

As they traveled inland, they observed mangroves slowly giving way to flood damaged bushes and palms. Egrets, large red-headed sarus cranes, black spoonbills, and ibises, some single, others in enormous flocks, flew away from this obtrusive incursion into their territory, each using their own species' peculiar cries to loudly proclaim their disapproval as they did so. When Diep had progressed beyond brackish water and into the truly fresh, there were many rice paddies, some being tended by peasants, their families, and their water buffalos. The sampan's presence was studiously ignored by all. See no evil, hear no evil.

Relations between the grunts and squids had become quite civil. After the shared experience and subsequent survival of their brush with the Hawke, they had all become fast friends, and their admiration for Diep, who had gotten them through it alive, knew no bounds. The story was much told already, and in each telling their Captain became a little more heroic.

Finally they reached the large oxbow known as the "Horseshoe." This was the boundary between the flat coastal plains and the mountainous interior highlands. Once again the topography gradually changed. The Song Kruc flowed stronger as it narrowed; slowing their progress while they cautiously worked their way upstream. They were soon surrounded on both sides by soaring tropical rain forests which blocked much of the sunlight, casting eerie dark shadows on the river. To Diep and his sailors all of the thick vines

and dense growth looked impenetrable and hostile. To Banh and his men it looked like home.

They were two days early for the rendezvous, but went up the small hidden tributary to the prearranged spot anyway. Diep knew the VC would soon be aware of their presence. These were their mountains and nothing happened here without their knowledge. The grunts armed themselves and after a short discussion, dispersed around the sampan in a protective formation. One minute they were there and the next, they simply vanished into the bush. The sailors took advantage of the lull, and got some shuteye. "Sleep when you can, not when you want to," is an old axiom of war.

Early the next morning they were awakened by voices coming out of the jungle. The VC were here to pick up their supplies. Sergeant Trinh came into the small clearing with his old comrade Sergeant Banh, followed by both of their rag-tag squads.

The two sergeants were delighted at their reunion. They had trained together, come up through the ranks together, and had many friends in common. They had a lot of gossip to catch up on, and there were military matters that needed to be discussed.

Diep put his sailors to work, and soon the precious crates were off-loaded. Sergeant Trinh couldn't believe his good fortune. There was crate after crate of AK-47s, Russian model 1944 50MM mortars, RPG-7s with both frag and heat ammo, Russian RPD machine guns, and 200 pounds of plastic explosives with det cord. And, if that wasn't enough to put a smile on his face, the crates of ammo certainly did. The High Command in Hanoi had not let him and his troops down.

Also, onboard were several pounds of the Cong's most insidious weapon: uncut heroin fresh from the Golden Triangle. It would be taken to all the bases and made available to GI's for next to nothing. It was Hanoi's most ardent wish that every American stationed in Vietnam would become addicted to heroin, and preferably heroin of a better quality than could be obtained stateside. Sending soldiers home with three hundred dollar a day

habits that had cost them only a few dollars a day to feed in Vietnam was like sending an army of human wrecking balls back into American society; junkies who would cause incalculable destruction and misery when they robbed, pillaged, looted or committed whatever vile criminal acts were necessary to fund their deadly addictions.

The next step was moving it all a few kilometers through the jungle to the vast system of underground tunnels that served as their main base. The VC had learned the value of burrowing from their occupiers, the Japanese, in World War Two. The Japanese were the woodchucks of the human race. Whatever territory they conquered, they soon had the enslaved populations digging and blasting away. They taught the Cong that their enemies couldn't destroy what they couldn't find, and they cleverly hid the entrances to their warrens. It was a source of great mirth when American patrols passed by close at hand without a clue.

Diep didn't much care for being underground. He was a seafaring man, and lived his life in the open. However, he was fascinated with this elaborate man-made cave. Some of the passages were even tall enough for walking. There were sleeping spaces, mess spaces, cooking spaces, food and munitions storage, latrines, and even a hospital. Diep and his sailors were invited to stay, and Sergeant Trinh produced several bottles of Seagram's Seven, saying with a flourish, "The White Devils we took these from no longer have need of it."

As they drank the whiskey, Diep and Banh's men once again told the story of the escape upriver from the destroyer. When Sergeant Trinh heard of this, he became quite interested. An aggressive Captain who was willing to take an enormous warship into inland waters? In the back of his mind the seed of an idea began to sprout.

The next day Diep and his crew were escorted back to their sampan by Trinh and some of his men. As a farewell gift they were given two RPGs and plenty of ammo. Upon parting Trinh told the Captain, "If the Junk Forces are lying in wait for you, these will enable you to punch your way through and fight your way back out to open sea. Thank you for all you have

Randy Miller

sacrificed to drive the White Devils and their curs from our motherland.” He bowed low, “Although our ranks and tasks are vastly different, you have given me much to think about. Good luck, Comrade Lieutenant.”



CHAPTER 11

THE HAWKE had been in Subic Bay for a week and the deck apes were ready to go back on patrol. They were now exhausted, hung over, beat up and broke. In spite of receiving the princely sum of fifty-five extra dollars per month for combat pay, it had all gone too fast. Zack only went into Olongapo once, and it was depressing. There were available women all over the PI, but he didn't want any of them. He knew Tally was the only girl for him, and God alone knew how many thousands of miles away she was, so mostly he just stayed onboard. He could pick up five bucks a day by taking the duty for the more Olongapo obsessed apes like Kearns, who was still madly in love. It was all the more money for Zack to send home. From time to time he and the others would walk over to the Enlisted Men's Club and have some beers, but that was about it. That and sleep. He knew another five or six weeks at sea was coming up and these patrols could knock the snot out of Superman let alone a mere mortal like himself.

All of their mail, which must have been spread around on every ship in the South China Sea, had finally caught up to them. The big news from

back in the Kingdom was mostly about making maple syrup. He had gotten a whopping total of fourteen letters from Tally and spent a good deal of his time trying to catch up with and answer all of her questions. Her curiosity about his work was seemingly endless.

They had received more than a month's worth of magazines: Time, Newsweek, Life, Look, and The Saturday Evening Post. All covered the same theme extensively: The Vietnam Protest Movement. The apes were fascinated. None of them had ever heard of a protest before. Up until now, when America went to war, everybody supported it. Anything different was an alien concept. They wondered what had happened to the country in their absence.

The magazines told them that fifteen-thousand students had gathered in Washington DC to protest the bombing campaign against North Vietnam. Fifteen-thousand, wondered Zack? He didn't know if there were fifteen-thousand people in all of the Northeast Kingdom. Maybe not even in all of Vermont. The news photos blew them away. "Doesn't anyone shave or get haircuts anymore?" Howell said to Zack, holding up the picture of an unkempt, bearded fellow for him to see. The anti-war movement spread like wildfire, and there were also protests in forty other American cities. And this wasn't just an American phenomenon: there were demonstrations in Rome and London. As Bob Dylan, that new folksinger from Howell's neck-of-the-woods shouted more than sang, "The times they are a changing." He was right. The whole country, the whole culture was in turmoil.

THE NEXT MORNING at quarters Kearns was nowhere to be found. After a thorough search of the ship, Chief McCoy wrote him up as AWOL or "Absent Without Official Leave." Zack and Howell glanced at each other and in that moment they both knew exactly where he was. Kearns had stayed to himself since coming into port, spending every minute of his time with the lovely Liezel. While on patrol the two had been writing each other. She wanted to quit hooking and return to Camiguin, and continued extolling

the virtues and beauty of her tiny home island. Liezel's family persistently begged her to come back. She had saved up quite a tidy sum of pesos and was fed up with Olongapo.

Kearns told his friends, "You don't even need money there. Food grows wild on trees and bushes. The fishing sounds great, its warm all the time, you don't even need a job to get by." That's all he wanted to talk about, that and Liezel, whom he claimed, loved him every bit as much as he loved her.

The report of Kearns' absence went right up the Hawke's Chain of Command. Captain Foley wasn't much worried. They weren't putting out to sea for a while and this happened from time to time. SNAFU: Situation Normal All Fouled Up. Usually some deck ape drank too many San Miguels and shacked up with a hooker. When his money runs out, he'll come back here fast enough, he thought, with his tail between his legs, and he'll stand in front of me for "Captain's Mast," where once again I'll have to enforce discipline. He'll take his medicine like all the rest of the screw-ups, and I'll make damned sure he never goes ashore in the PI again. If he isn't back aboard in twenty-four hours, then I'll worry about it.

THAT EVENING after knock-off, Howell and Zack put on tropical white uniforms, and made a beeline to the Acme Club. Lailani was working, so the three of them took a table and got drinks: beers for the boys and sugar water for Lailani. At first she was evasive, but after several expensive bar drinks she put her hand on Howell's thigh, and started rubbing. When he didn't object, she began to see the situation as a potentially beneficial financial opportunity, and began talking.

"Liezal like a lotta girls. She wanna money, but she no likka whata she gotta do to get it. She no party, party girl. She sava her money, she wanna go back. She misses her family big time. They neva come here. They neva leave dere island. Neva neva. Too far. She a gooda girl. She feel bad alla time. She homesick but she falla in love with Kearns. He hatea Navy. He hatea blow up people. He lova Liezel. They wanna be together, but no can do.

Navy no leta seaman marry Tagalog girl. Neva neva. Liezel tella him, youa comma with a me, they neva find youa. I taka care a youa nice. I makka youa feel good. My family hidea youa. We havva babies. Youa neva neva go back, youa comma with me.” And simple as that, he did.

Mystery solved. Lailani’s hand had moved up higher on Howell’s thigh and it all sounded good to him. Where do you sign up? No more Navy, living in a tropical paradise with a hammock strung between two palm trees, never having to work again, making babies with a tropical Filipina beauty who has dedicated her life to catering to your every need. Sounded like heaven on earth to him. Howell figured he’d get a little bit of heaven for himself, and after some haggling left with Lailani for a hotel room.

Zack said he’d wait, not quite trusting Howell to return if he didn’t. Was this like a disease, he pondered? Would other apes catch it and disappear into the bush as well? On further reflection, he thought not. Love and attraction are strong forces which could not, should not, be fought any more than a rip current. Anyone is lucky to get hit with that connection whenever or wherever in the world it happens. People spend their whole lives looking for love and never find it, or if they do, they mess it up big time. Zack knew it would be many months before he would be with his Tally again, and when he thought about it too much, it was like his heart was crushed. Yet he knew if he persevered, if he just hung in there and passed this test, they would be rewarded with a long fulfilling life together. But Lord, he silently prayed, it’s so hard, and I miss her so much. Please help me get through this.

It was a slow night at the Acme Club, and several of the girls drifted over. They knew Zack wouldn’t leave with any of them. They knew he was powerfully in love with his stateside girl. Many of them had tried and failed, and all had come away respecting this polite sailor who talked so funny. They thought he treated them like younger sisters, and he made them laugh. They liked that. Most of the bar girls in the PI were incurable romantics, and in spite of their sexcapades, they were always looking for love, as the country western song says, in all the wrong places. But they knew true love when they

saw it and it made their hearts flutter. Both Zack's and Kearns' relationships were like storybook romances to them, and it renewed their hope of finding it for themselves. These were the stories they told each other; the stories of love, not the stories of lust.

Howell and Lailani came back, and they ordered a couple of beers and began talking about Kearns. Zack said, "I don't blame the dumb shit. Who am I to tell him, ya can't do that. It sounds good to me. If I didn't have Tally waitin', maybe I'da been gone, myself. Soonah or latah, they will catch him. The Navy might not look too hahd but they'll nevah fo'get. When they catch up to him, he'll pay big time. They'll toss his ass in the brig and those ja'heads'll pull his ahms and legs out. You know they'ah gonna send people out to talk to us."

"If they do, we ain't gonna tell them squat," replied Howell.

"Damn right."

EIGHTY-FIVE-HUNDRED MILES away in the tiny hamlet of Bridway, Vermont it was a Saturday morning in early April, and winter was losing its grip. The river ice was breaking up, and the snow banks were steadily retreating. On an almost daily basis the perpetually dark gray skies were still sending down dribs and drabs of frozen rain and flurries. As the thaw took hold, the white ground was gradually turning into brown mud. All around the state, maple syrup evaporators were pouring out thick clouds of wood smoke, and the air everywhere was as smoggy as it ever was in Los Angeles during rush hour.

The Goodwins lived near the center of the settlement in one of the twenty or so antiquated homes clustered around a small park. Tally sat at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee re-reading Zack's letters. She was a smart girl, around five-feet-five, trim, with green-eyes, and long blond hair. She was an honors senior who planned on becoming a Registered Nurse.

Tally came from a very old New England family. Her father, Aaron, was born and raised in the Berkshire Mountains of Massachusetts, and in the

early sixteen hundreds his forefathers sailed to the New World with the other pilgrims on the Winthrop Fleet. As her mother liked to point out, when these newcomers disembarked from their ships, her ancestors had already been here long enough to clear the land and build a village.

After serving in World War Two, Aaron came to Vermont on the GI Bill to study at Lyndon State University. While there he met the love of his life, Marney Prichard, an undergrad from Maine, and wooed and wed her. He received his teaching certificate in science, took a job at the regional high school in Derby Line, and he and Marney began raising their baby girl. It was a disappointment to both of them when they couldn't have any more children.

As a youngster Tally had attended a one-room schoolhouse with twenty-two pupils of various grades, and a dedicated but seriously overworked teacher. Eight years later she graduated at the top of her class of four, and was sent to the regional high school. Tally kept her own counsel, but wasn't a loner. She was known for her quiet common sense, and other girls came to her for advice. She had one close friend from her grammar school days, Molly Faye, who also lived in town.

Tally met Zack in her freshman year, and heedless of their contrasting backgrounds, she was strongly attracted to him. She came from an educated town family. Zack came from a hard-scrabble hill farm. Zack's family was Catholic. Hers was traditional Congregational. Tally pronounced her R's. Zack didn't.

Zack was self confident yet unassuming. He excelled at sports, especially boxing and wrestling, and was polite and considerate. What set him apart was his wicked sense of humor. Zack was undisputedly the class clown and he was held in high regard by his peers. On the other hand, when teachers found out he was enrolled in their classes, they pulled out their hair in frustration.

The very second Zack laid eyes on Tally he fell in love with her. Because they came from two different worlds he understood there might be some twists and turns on the path he must follow to win her heart. Even so, he

never doubted the outcome. He was certain they belonged together, and he was right. During their sophomore year Tally's feelings for him began to grow. Molly went out with him for a couple of months and kept extolling his virtues. While the relationship didn't go anywhere, they had begun hanging out as a threesome and soon after the inevitable breakup, Tally and Zack became a couple.

Although Marney approved of the romance, Aaron didn't. But, he was clever enough to keep his opinion to himself. He was overjoyed when Zack joined the Navy thinking this would certainly lead to a parting of the ways. So far he had been wrong.

Tally loved Zack with every particle of her being. Despite her young age, she knew in her heart this was it. She wanted to spend her life with him and have his babies. She was clearly being tested by God, and if they could only get through this war, if Zack could just stay alive, they would have a long, wonderful life together. Tally wasn't a lazy girl. She wasn't afraid of hardship or sacrifice. She had made up her mind. Her heart was set. She would make this work.

His letters bothered her. He was sometimes vague, trying to keep her from worrying, she supposed, but she probed him with questions. She needed to understand. She recognized Zack's job on that destroyer was flat-out dangerous. He was outside every day regardless of the weather. If he went overboard, he would die; the sea would kill him, and if he died, she would die too! As if that wasn't bad enough, the war was getting worse, and the Hawke kept taking on more missions. She'd feel a whole lot better about it if he had another job inside the ship somewhere, but she knew that wasn't who he was. He'd never be happy there. Zack had spent so much of his life outside on his farm, and that's where he needed to be. Tally felt that being so far away from him was like losing a part of her body. A tear slowly slid down her cheek. She loved him, and even though they were half a world apart, they'd get through this trial together. She knew that steel forged in fire became much stronger after it was put to the flame, and so, they would be too.

BACK IN A MUCH DIFFERENT COUNTRY than the Northeast Kingdom of, by God, Vermont, the two apes finished their beers, said their fare-thee-wells to the lovely ladies of the Acme Club, and strolled out into the rainy night of Olongapo. Zack said to Howell, "If the Eskimos have thirty wohds fo' snow, then these people need at least that many fo' rain."

"No problem," said Howell, "Try this: stinking rain, gol'darn rain...."

"Okay, okay, Mike," Zack said with a chuckle, "I get the idea."

They got themselves some monkey meat and headed for the main gate. As they formed up in line to go through, Howell said, "Uh oh, don't look up, but I think we might have a slight problem here." Of course, the minute he told Zack not to look up, he did, and immediately saw that the Marine guard was none other than the lance corporal Howell had beat on in the Kit Kat Klub. The recognition was mutual, and the jarhead snarled and started shouting, "You two there, out of line, out of line now!"

Other Marines were materializing from nowhere and began running in their direction. Howell looked at Zack and shrugged. There was nowhere for them to go. If they ran back towards town they'd just get picked off later, so they stepped out. Backed by five other jarheads, the lance corporal rushed up to them with a gleeful expression and said, "Look at you two, you're a disgrace to the Navy. You're both shit-faced and it looks like you've been in a fight, too. Look at your uniforms, all muddy and torn."

Howell looked himself over, "Whaddya mean all muddy and torn? We're squared away, and we're not drunk either."

The guard just smiled while a black Chevy panel truck outfitted with bars drove up. His brethren grabbed on to the apes, and before they knew what was happening, the jarheads slammed them up against the side of the vehicle and very efficiently handcuffed them behind their backs so tightly their wrists started bleeding. They then, none too gently, threw them in the back and drove off.

Cosmic Laws of Cause and Effect, Karma, and Payback were now in play that would have repercussions far beyond whatever any of the participants

could ever have imagined. Whether the two apes believed in these laws didn't matter, but they did know they were in big trouble. They had fallen into the hands of their enemies.

The Marines were in no hurry. There were three of them riding up front. The Subic Bay Base is huge and they knew every inch of it. A half-hour later they found what they were looking for, which was a spot far away from any witnesses. Howell was dragged out first. The lance corporal held a special place in his heart for him and asked, "How do you like it now, muthah fuckah?"

"Take these cuffs off me, you chicken shit, and we'll settle this right here, right now!"

With a sardonic smile his captor replied, "Now why the hell would I do that?"

IN THE BACK of the truck Zack could hear the muffled sounds of clubs striking flesh and grunts of exertion and moans of pain. Somewhere along the way his fear completely vanished and left behind a clear, white hot rage. All he wanted to do now was kill these cowards for beating on his friend while his hands were cuffed behind his back.

When it was Zack's turn, he was ready and waiting. The second the door opened, he jumped out and landed a hard kick right to the lance corporal's gut. He went down like a shot, trying to suck air, but Zack went down just as hard, because he was unable to break his fall with his hands. The other Marines were on him in a heartbeat with their weighted wooden clubs pounding away like Mickey Mantle trying to hit one out of Yankee Stadium. The last thing Zack remembered before losing consciousness was the heavy rain of nightsticks falling on his unprotected face.

At 0030, or a half-hour after they were supposed to be back onboard, the black paddy wagon drove up the pier and parked next to the Hawke. The Marines dragged the beaten and bloody apes over the gangplank and onto the quarterdeck. The lance corporal told the OOD, "We got a couple

of your crew here. They came through the gate so drunk they could hardly walk, and it's obvious by looking at 'em that they've been fighting.

The OOD asked, "What do you want us to do with them?"

"Up to you, sir, we're just making a delivery here, but I hope you throw the book at them. Screw-ups like this give us all a bad name."

"Very well, then."

The Marines saluted, snickered to themselves, and left.

Zack and Howell stood at attention as best they could, and Ensign Wells, who happened to be the OOD, asked them, "What do you have to say for yourselves?"

Howell didn't waste any time, "They're full of crap, sir," and he quickly explained the whole incident to him. When he finished, Wells, who had been developing nicely under the tutelage of Chief McCoy, was pissed, really pissed, and told them, "You both get your asses down to your racks and get some sleep. Don't worry about this. I'll take care of it."

When they had saluted and left, Wells said to his Petty Officer of the Watch, "We're not logging this in, Morrisey. Forget you saw it,"

"Saw what, sir? I'd like to drown those smug sons-a-bitches."

THE NEXT MORNING Howell and Zack's faces were black and blue and lumped up big time. It hurt to look at them. The rest of their bodies weren't in a whole lot better shape, and just moving or breathing was extremely painful. The guards had certainly done a professional job of it. Early in the morning Wells had informed Chief McCoy of the past night's events involving the two apes and the Marines. The chief called his petty officers together and they talked over the situation. It was more of a war council than a discussion. Ensign Wells was purposely excluded, not because he couldn't be trusted, but because this was an enlisted problem, and the less he knew, the better. This called, no, it screamed for payback. Not quick payback, but patient, well thought out payback. McCoy had made up his mind that those Marines would not, absolutely would not, be allowed to get away with this attack on his men.

After Quarters was dismissed, Zack and Howell were told to stay behind. Slocum peered at them through disgusted eyes and said, “Look at y’all, yew look more like stinkin’ jack-o-lanterns than sailors. Yew look in the mirror this mornin’? Yer nose is crooked, Martin. Yer gonta need it set.” He shook his head. “I’m gonta have ta take that back, ye’d give pumpkins a bad name. Yer so damn ugly ye’d scare the crap outta kids on Halloween. One look at yew, and they’d run away screamin’. Yer a damn disgrace ta First Division. I jist can’t believe it.” He ranted, “Yew let them jarhead pukers do that ta y’all?” He shook his head in disgust. “No deck ape worth his salt’d let that happen. Now listen up, don’t yew go through them gates nomore while we be here, yew hear me? Yew can go ta Grande Island, or yew can go ta the EM Club, but don’t yew go inta town. If them maggots git a hold a yew one more time, yew jist might not make it back, and we’re gonta be short-handed enough without that dumb-ass Kearns, so I say again, DO NOT GO INTA TOWN!” he bellowed, “Do yew copy, troops?”

They both nodded a shamefaced yes.

“Now git yer sorry asses down ta sick bay and have Doc Phillips fix yew up!”

AT NOON, two burly men in civilian clothes who were not civilians came aboard, set up shop in the mess decks, and began interviewing everyone who knew Kearns directly, or indirectly. They were detectives from the Office of Naval Investigation, or ONI. After a frustrating day they knew no more about Kearns’ whereabouts than when they started. They did gather one important nugget of information though. Kearns was in love with a Filipina, which made them happy. They had investigated the deaths of far too many young men who had ended up with their throats cut in Olongapo, and they came away knowing that at least he was alive. Screwing up big time, yes, but alive. Sooner or later they’d track him down.



CHAPTER 12

THE MONSOON WAS IN FULL FORCE and the daily downpour was the only predictable thing in the crew's lives. Regardless of the constant rain, the heat was still oppressive, and the men lived on salt pills and water which sweated out of them just as quickly as they drank it.

The Hawke had just cleared Subic Bay when General Quarters was sounded. Captain Foley kept them at their stations for thirty-six long hours. He knew there were gunfire missions in the near future, and he needed to be sure his troops could handle whatever tasks they were assigned with speed and accuracy.

Howell was rotated out of his lookout post and onto the helm, the lee helm, and then back to lookout again. Around and around he went. Zack and the rest of his gun crew slept when they could, but the mount was hotter than an oven set on broil, and they were directed to fire just often enough to keep them alert. This was another of Captain Foley's planned exercises in sleep deprivation. Four times during the drill he sent around mess cooks with sandwiches, water, and coffee. Between dusk and dawn the gunners fired

Star Shells. Descending ever so slowly on their parachutes, the projectiles themselves were dazzlingly bright and cast forth a far reaching brilliant but subdued light. When used to repulse night attacks on U.S. Military Bases, they turned darkness into day, making it impossible for enemy fighters to find concealment or safety anywhere on the battlefield.

The following evening the Hawke put into Qui Nhon Harbor, and lay-to while the Captain checked in with Division 22. After he received his orders, they left the harbor and steamed north.

ON THE BRIDGE Giang asked Lieutenant Connolly, the OOD, "Have you noticed how often we are called out to board the same junks?"

"It'd be hard not to. And since you brought it up, maybe you can tell me why their crews are so damn cheerful despite our interfering with their livelihoods?"

"These are impoverished people, Mr. Connolly. They are happy to see us because they know we will give them supplies and American tobacco. Remember though, that our reception will not be quite so welcoming should we come across any Viet Cong smugglers."

As the Captain walked in, Giang came to attention and requested: "Permission to speak freely, sir?"

"At ease, Lieutenant. What's on your mind?"

"Captain, if I may, we are spending far too much time repeatedly searching many of the junks in our sector."

"Several of my conning officers share your view, Mr. Giang, but I'm concerned that if we ease up we could be targeting them for VC exploitation."

"You are quite right, sir. Reducing the number of inspections is not the answer, but if you'll hear me out, I have an idea that might make them faster and more efficient."

"Continue."

"Thank you, sir. When we see groups of vessels we recognize, I propose we heave-to and have them approach the fantail. We'll have Palmer and

Eastman on hand with their Thompsons for security, the apes can tie them off, and we'll examine their papers and payloads right there. It'll save us the trouble of dealing with the motor Whaleboat, and it'll take a fraction of the time it does now."

The Captain gave it a moment of thought and replied, "Very well, Mr. Giang. Mr. Connolly, make a note for the other OODs to inform me first. This isn't to happen unless I'm on the bridge."

"Aye, sir."

THE NEXT MORNING there was a small fishing flotilla eagerly waiting to be searched. The Captain nodded his approval, and Giang grabbed a bullhorn and ordered them to come to the rear of the ship. They quickly complied, squabbling amongst themselves about who would be first.

Howell and Zack were on the fantail scraping paint when Giang hurried over and told them to make fast the closest junk. As they did so, they couldn't help but notice the sickening stench of fermenting fish and the abject poverty of those they saw onboard. The rags the apes cleaned their paint brushes with were in better shape than the tattered clothes these people wore. Notwithstanding their obvious hardships, they seemed remarkably good humored. Finishing up with the lines, Howell looked around and saw a very old man lying motionless in a shaded corner of the deck.

"Mr. Giang?" he said and pointed down, "He don't look so good."

"No he doesn't. You better get Doc Phillips." While waiting, he checked their papers for what seemed to him like the hundredth time, but was probably only the tenth. Hell, he could probably remember their names if he thought about it hard enough. He joked to himself, and how is the Missus doing today, Mr. Nguyen? They were looking at his cigarette with envy and longing, almost salivating. It was like trying to eat a steak with a hungry dog watching, so he passed around his pack. They greedily lit up, and in turn politely offered him betel, which he just as politely declined.

Howell was back in a flash with Phillips in tow. The doc jumped down onto the junk with his small black bag, and Palmer, with his ever present Thompson submachine gun watched protectively over the proceedings. The corpsman carefully examined his patient from head to toe. He noticed a one-sided weakness and asked a younger version of the old man, through Giang, how long had he been like this. “Since last night, honored sir,” was the reply.

Phillips knew the old gent had had a stroke. There wasn't much anyone could do for him other than keep him comfortable. He sent Zack off to find the cook and see if he could get a couple of big cans of broth. He then sent Howell down to supply to get some blankets. When they completed their tasks and returned, he gave these items to the junk family along with some aspirins, and instructed them thusly: “Your grandfather has had some bleeding in his brain. This has caused him to lose feeling and the use of his left side. Let him rest, keep him warm, and pray that he recovers. Give him these pills twice a day. Feed him the broth, but do not let him have any solid food until you see him swallowing well.”

Giang translated: “A demon has entered grandfather and taken possession of his left side. You must light incense and pray for the evil spirit to depart, if he does not, grandfather will join his ancestors. Keep him warm, feed him that broth, but not too much, and don't let him choke. Give him the pills twice a day. They will help drive the devil out.”

They bowed and thanked them both. Giang gave them the obligatory smokes, some chocolate bars, and canned goods. They gazed upon all of their booty with big avaricious red-fanged betel grins, looking like Vietnamese versions of Publisher's Clearing House winners proudly admiring their prizes.

When they were released, the occupants began a loud discussion with those impatiently awaiting their turn, telling them there was a powerful medicine man onboard the White Devil Ship. Giang listened and shook his head in frustration. He told Phillips, “You better stay.” Upon hearing this wondrous news, the remaining junks' crews started complaining of all

manner of injuries and illnesses. In no time at all the doc was in the thick of it, stitching, setting, diagnosing, and dispensing various pills, treatments, and wisdom to his new patients. He had rarely been happier.

All Giang had tried to do was make searching, and inspecting more streamlined, more efficient. Well, that had certainly backfired. He knew it wouldn't end here. Not by a long shot. Word of Doc Phillips' free medical clinic would soon be all over the South China Sea grapevine, and there'd be an endless line of junks loaded up with sick relatives, and relatives of relatives, from all over the country looking for the Hawke. Winning their hearts and minds was all well and good, thought Giang, but there had to be limits...didn't there?

THE MONSOON WAS raging and its gusting winds were blowing the torrential rain sideways. Lieutenant Sanchez was having a very bad day. His platoon had been ordered to attack the village of Son Mai in Quang Ngai Province. This wasn't their first time here, either. Three weeks earlier they had tangled with elements of the forty-eighth Viet Cong Battalion nearby and the Communists had retreated into this village, like "Brer Rabbit" disappearing into his briar patch. Now Sanchez and his platoon had been ordered to clear it out and burn it down. Easier said than done.

So here they were again. The problem with Son Mai, aside from the fact it was a heavily armed Viet Cong stronghold, was that an impenetrable thorny hedgerow surrounded its perimeter and also grew between the hooches. Lieutenant Sanchez knew this village would be booby trapped with punji stakes and the Cong would have many other terrible surprises waiting for them if they ever got that far, which was now looking pretty doubtful.

If that wasn't bad enough, Son Mai was a small island in the middle of a vast shallow lake used for farming rice. Even worse, the Vietnamese wasted nothing and fertilized their paddies with human excrement. The stench was so strong it gagged the men. It was like wading into a sewer. The Cong waited until Sanchez and his soldiers had slogged halfway through before

opening up on them with RPD machine guns. The Americans had no other choice but to throw themselves down into the foul, thigh-deep cesspool. In more ways than one, they were in deep shit.

Sanchez needed help and he needed it fast. “Collins,” he yelled to his Radio Telephone Operator, or RTO, “Get headquarters and tell them we need fires right now!” Collins did so without delay, and was given a frequency and a call sign, but when he made contact and gave them the position, he was told they couldn’t shoot the mission because he was too close to the Gun-Target Line. Sanchez grabbed the handset and shouted in desperation, “What do you mean too close to the G-T Line? Where the hell are you, anyway?!”

“The South China Sea,” the voice on the other end drawled lazily.

Sanchez had a moment of stunned revelation. He had inadvertently called in naval gunfire. They told him in ROTC you could only reach them through ANGLICO, but nevertheless, he had somehow established direct communications with a ship. He wasn’t about to complain, though. With the heavy fusillade of 7.62x39 rounds zinging by, he knew this might be his last chance to keep his men alive. The Cong had now decimated the inadequate cover of the rice and were quickly zeroing in on them.

Sanchez’s thoughts went into overdrive. How to make this work? He looked at the declination diagram on his map, and converted “Grid North” into “True North,” correctly assuming the ship’s Fire Control would be using gyro compasses. Thank God, the variation was almost thirty degrees! He called them back, this time using a True North azimuth. The voice with the West Texas accent said, “Stand by.” A few minutes later, a barrage of shells came thundering in, and the village was consumed by raging flame and turbulent black smoke. After Son Mai was completely obliterated, Sanchez told the ship to cease fire.

When the explosives finally burned out and the driving rain finished extinguishing the remnants of the smoldering fire that was still hungrily licking the last of the red hot coals, Sanchez’s men slowly stood and began

tending to their wounded and KIAs. The lieutenant ordered his platoon to stage everything on the ashes of the Viet Cong village. As they went about their tasks, the soldiers were bewildered, for in spite of the monsoon's wild wind and fierce rain, there was an almost supernatural stillness about the place. It was like being in an empty church. The few trees left standing had been completely stripped of leaves, branches and bark. The freshly turned earth looked like it had been grotesquely sown with random body parts and broken weapons.

The only signs of any past habitation were the punji pits and spider holes which were now open and exposed. Sanchez and his men were certainly not strangers to death and destruction. In fact, they had seen more of it than anyone ever should, but they had never seen anything quite like this.

His RTO called out, "Hey Lieutenant, the squid wants a Bomb Damage Assessment," and handed him the handset.

Sanchez shook his head in shock and said, "There's absolutely nothing left of it."

The Fire Control Tech replied in his easy way, "That's the way we like to do business, sir. Happy customers with no one left behind to complain."

"What ship are you on, son?"

"The Hawke, sir. Call us anytime. Glad to have helped."

DESPITE THE MISERABLE weather, Sergeant Banh was in a fine mood. He had been sent down to Son Mai to fortify and defend it. In many ways Son Mai was the ideal Communist commune. Its citizens hated the Americans with a purity seldom seen. In 1953, during the waning days of French Colonialism, Foreign Legionnaires discovered a huge arms cache and as a result, massacred every living person here. It had since been re-settled by relatives who would neither forgive, nor forget. French or American; it made no difference to them. They were all invaders that were a pox on their country. The motherland needed to be drenched with their blood.

Son Mai was also self-supporting, producing such a surplus of rice that the inhabitants were able to barter for all of their other needs. Unlike most

other villes, they never hoarded supplies from the VC, but were generous, and proud to support them however they could, be it with fighters or food.

The Cong's work went well. They dug spider holes, put in punji pits, and mined the perimeter. Banh had never before seen such a naturally defensible village, and if any of their foes made it through the rice paddies, they'd be in for the surprise of their lives. Son Mai was impregnable.

He knew it was only a matter of time before they were attacked again and on the morning the alarm sounded, his troops were ready. More than ready. Banh checked to make sure the spider holes were manned. To the casual eye, they were invisible, that was their beauty; when the enemy stormed past, VC soldiers would jump out of hiding and cut them down. Then Banh walked over to the east side of the village, the direction of the coming assault. There were forty fighters concealed in the hedgerow. All eyes were on him. When the intruders were half way through the paddy he gave a nod, and the machine guns cut loose. They all laughed silently when the round-eyes flung themselves down into the shit-filled water.

The trouble with the RPDs, Banh thought, was they only fired on full auto and at this rate, they'd run out of ammo soon. As a precaution, he moved through the ranks and signaled every other man to stop shooting. Even so, he knew it wouldn't take much longer to finish off the rest of these foreign dogs....

SUDDENLY THE CLAMOR OF COMBAT was drowned out by a powerful high pitched scream that quickly grew so very loud it ruptured all of their eardrums. Sergeant Banh howled in terror for he had not forgotten the fearful shriek the White Devil Ship's cannon made while firing on him and his troops as they fled up the Song Kruc River, AND HE KNEW THIS WAS THE SOUND OF HIS OWN DOOM! Banh and his squad were immediately bathed in a burning bright light as a million wailing winds surrounded them. Then in a blinding flash everything was gone. All was darkness. It was as if Sergeant Banh and his fighters had never been born.

AFTER SAVING LIEUTENANT SANCHEZ, the Hawke was sent up to the DMZ to provide fires. When she ran low on food, fuel and ammo, the destroyer steamed southeast toward Yankee Station to rendezvous with supply ships there. About nine miles offshore, Howell spotted what appeared to be a small coastal freighter on the very edge of the horizon, “Bridge, port lookout, I’ve got a contact bearing three-hundred degrees relative, about eight miles out. It seems to have some size, but it’s running in the same general direction we are, so I can’t tell exactly what it is yet.

The phone talker relayed the information to the OOD who decided to investigate.

“All engines ahead flank.”

“All engines ahead flank, aye, sir.”

“Steer course Zero nine seven.”

“Steer course Zero nine seven, aye, sir.”

“Messenger, go get Lieutenant Giang.”

The Captain didn’t need to be notified. The minute the ship changed course and speed, he knew the Hawke was on the hunt, “Something going on, Mr. Moretti?”

“Not really, Captain. But there is a contact about six miles dead ahead that we should check out.”

“Very well, then. Proceed.”

Giang entered the bridge, was briefed, took a pair of binoculars, and went out to the port wing. Lighting up a smoke, he asked, “What do you have, Howell?”

“I know it sounds crazy, sir, but I think it’s that motorized sampan we chased up the river last month.”

Giang took a good long look and was so startled he dropped his cigarette. There is a God in heaven, he thought. His heart started jackhammering and he returned to the bridge. Should he be wrong, he did not wish to lose face with his Commanding Officer, so he said more calmly than he felt, “Captain, it’s a carbon copy of the cargo sampan that slipped through our fingers on

the Song Kruc,” but he knew it was one and the same, only now there was no place for it to hide.

The Captain put his own binoculars down, “He won’t get away from us this time, Mr. Giang.”

OUT ON THE BRIDGE WING with a bullhorn, Giang ordered the sampan to heave-to but they ignored him and kept right on going. The Captain was delighted, and told Moretti, “Put a round of AAC over their bow close enough to part their hair.”

“Aye, sir.”

BOOM!

It didn’t seem to have slowed them down any, in fact it appeared their fear had given them wings.

“Do you believe that, sir? They’re still running!”

“They won’t for long. I’m going to put a stick through their spokes. Don’t bother talking to them anymore, Mr. Giang, they’re probably all deaf as posts by now. You better hightail it down to the Whaleboat.”

He turned to the OOD, “Call out the Boarding Party, Mr. Moretti.”

“Aye, sir.”

The apes assembled on the 01 deck and began making preparations to lower the boat while Giang’s gang put on their flak jackets and loaded their weapons.

ON THE SAMPAN, Diep couldn’t believe his bad luck. His lookouts saw the destroyer as soon as she came over the horizon. He had just crossed down to the DMZ and was running for deep water when he was spotted. His only prayer was to try and get out into International Waters and hope the captain of the White Devil Ship would then decline to search his vessel. Not much hope there, but it was the only option. It was all he could do.

When the second shell screamed by, he knew it was over. “Stop the motor,” he ordered.

“But Captain...”

“I said stop the motor now!”

His mind automatically began racing over all of his many runs. In seconds, he saw years go by. He saw the tons of munitions and the hundreds of fighters he had successfully smuggled into the south, but it was all coming to a close, to an end. There was nothing for it now, but to try and brazen it out, and if that didn't work, to wait and see if an opportunity presented itself to take as many of the round-eyed bastards as he could down to hell with him.

THE BOARDING PARTY was in the boat and the apes were swinging it out. Giang kept it short and sweet. “Keep your eyes and ears open. This is for real. If they're dirty they'll have nothing to lose, so be prepared to shoot. Everybody have a round in your chambers?” They all nodded. “Good. When you get ready to board, safeties off. Palmer, be alert, I'm counting on you. Eastman, give me that Thompson.”

The seas were calm, the sky was overcast and drizzling. It was a short run to the sampan, no more than seventy-five yards. Both Brownings on the starboard side of the bridge were trained on it.

Giang called out for the sampan's crew to assemble on deck and put their hands on their heads with their fingers laced together. They dropped Palmer onboard and tied off. Palmer herded them away from the motor Whaleboat. Something's wrong, he thought. There's definitely a bad vibe here. He was real careful to keep his line of fire away from his brothers who were now boarding. Giang and Palmer both had fingers on their triggers. Hope for the best, prepare for the worst. Giang nodded a silent warning at Palmer and faced the sampan's crew.

There were six men, a woman, and a young boy of about ten onboard. They looked scared to death. The woman produced the vessel's papers. Her accent put her place of origin somewhere around Saigon. The others were mute, and Giang knew damned well why. He saw the cargo area was filled

with old fish, but that wasn't all. There were three panic-stricken sea snakes down there furiously darting around looking for a way out. Giang shouted at the sampan's crew to kill them. No one moved so much as a muscle. Giang took the oldest, a man of about forty that he thought must be the Captain, prodded him to the edge of the hold with the Thompson's barrel, and shoved him in. The man instinctively cursed Giang as he tumbled down onto the fish. His accent was clearly from the north. He took out a knife and swiftly caught and killed the deadly poisonous serpents, muttering obscenities as he did so.

Then all hell broke loose. The man in the hold with a bloody knife in one hand and a writhing, headless snake in the other screamed, "Bay gio!" dropped both, and grabbed an AK-47 that had been concealed in the overhang. Before he could bring it to bear, or get a round off, flames erupted from Giang's machine gun barrel as he stitched off a short burst of the Thompson's forty-five caliber ammunition blowing the man apart. Giang's line of fire was angled down into the hold, and several of his shots set off a series of explosions from the munitions that were buried under the fish.

When Lieutenant Diep screamed out to his crew, they drew concealed Makorov pistols from their sleeves. Schmidt and Ames were both shot before they could react. One minute the VC were all hands on their heads, eyes downcast and docile, the next they were fighting like tigers.

Palmer's hackles were up. He was ready when they made their move, and he was quick. He killed every last one of them in seconds. Just mowed them down like wheat on the farm. Blood and chunks of flesh flew every which way and painted that sampan red. Giang's words rang in his ears, "All are now the enemy and all must die." So die you mother fuckers, he said to himself, as he controlled the muzzle climb and sent them all to hell. When the drum was empty, he replaced it and clicked off the thumb safety, but it was unnecessary. The Cong had been herded into a tight little group and now none of them moved. The Boarding Party was still for a long second. It was not a pretty sight. The Thompson is an ugly weapon and the forty-five

ACP is an ugly bullet, but the enemy had dealt the play. The sampan was rapidly sinking. Giang broke the silence, “Get Ames and Schmidt in the boat, come on, let’s go!” and they swiftly swarmed aboard and headed back to the Hawke.

THE APES AT the davits and those on the bridge watched in complete surprise as the carnage unfolded. It all happened so fast. Doc Phillips met the boarding party as the Whaleboat was swung aboard, and sat the injured men right down on the 01 deck. He cut off all the clothing on their torsos, and examined each of their wounds. It looked like they might have several cracked ribs, and the bruising was bad, really bad. They had some of the worst hematomas he’d ever seen, but their flak jackets had done the job and stopped the bullets. Thankfully, there were no penetrating injuries. After treating his patients, he carefully checked out both pieces of body armor and thought to himself, Oh Lord, if these guys had been shot with anything bigger than those itty-bitty peashooters they’d be goners.

UP ON THE BRIDGE, the gunners opened up with the Brownings and sank what little was left of the sampan. The Captain smiled to himself, and thought with a great deal of satisfaction, who’s laughing now, you son-of-a-bitch?



CHAPTER 13

THEY HAD BEEN ON PATROL for six weeks, and the Hawke and her crew were tired and low on supplies. Zack was especially drained. He hadn't been sleeping well. He was having a recurring dream that kept waking him up. Zack always dreamt in vivid color, which wasn't helping much either. In his dream he was on the 01 deck watching as the sampan was boarded. He saw Palmer herd the Vietnamese crew tightly together, saw Lieutenant Giang throw the old man down in the hold, heard someone shout out something in Vietnamese, and saw the pandemonium that ensued. He saw the black pajama clad crew pull pistols; saw the short, uneven exchange of fire. He saw Schmidt and Ames stagger backwards clutching their chests. He saw Palmer cut them all down with his Thompson. He heard their screams of panic and pain; he saw the little boy standing in front of the woman, his mother he presumed, saw him get shot through the neck and saw his head pop right off. For a macabre split second, with his hands locked together in his hair, it looked for all the world like the child was trying to put it back on. He saw their bodies

jerk from the impact of the forty-five caliber bullets, and he saw the red, red blood and globs of meat splatter everywhere. He saw that Thompson rip those people apart.

In his dream he saw their souls, gray-green ethereal wisps, rise skyward leaving their bodies as soon as they stopped their spasms. He saw the sampan slowly sink down beneath the waves, and watched the clear blue water cleanse and cover their mutilated bodies. That's usually when he woke up, and when he did, his heart was pounding, his mouth was dry, and it was difficult for him to go back to sleep. Zack didn't know it, but he wasn't the only one having these dreams, and his dad could have told him they weren't likely to go away soon. The intervals between those nightmares would increase with time, but they'd never fully quit. Some memories are so terrible that they indelibly scorch themselves right into the viewer's mind and Zack owned it, or it owned Zack, hard to tell which.

At Quarters Chief McCoy announced, "We're headin' into the PI fer some R and R. Martin and Howell, yew two apes stay outta Olongapo 'til I tell yew different."

They both nodded wearily in mutual assent.

Captain Foley let his crew rest on the two-day crossing. It had been a long, exhausting patrol with too many missions. Truth be told, he was every bit as worn out as his men.

A MAJORITY of the night clubs in Olongapo were owned by retired Navy chiefs. Most of them had acquired local spouses or girlfriends and consequently, had large extended families here. The living was cheap and these dives had good payouts with which to supplement their meager retirement checks. Since the wives had come up through the ranks, they knew how to manage them efficiently and keep their workers happy. It was every bar girl's dream to marry a sailor, and those who did and ended up with their own businesses were much envied, and typically ruled their roosts with iron fists.

CHIEF McCoy changed into tropical whites prior to paying a visit to an old crony he knew from his Korean War days, Senior Chief Gunner's Mate George Landry, retired. Landry himself thought he had won the lottery. He didn't see Olongapo as Sodom and Gomorrah, or more appropriately, Sodom and Gonorrhea, he saw it as the land of Milk and Honey. He had fallen in love with, and married his beautiful Dalisay, a bar girl here. She was in her early forties, still trim and gorgeous. The League of Nations had passed through the PI, and she had genes from many of them, with straight black hair and almond eyes. After George put in his twenty years he bought her the Shangri-La Club, and never looked back. He stayed in the Navy for another five just to boost his retirement checks, and then became a permanent resident of his beloved adopted town.

Dali did all the day-to-day running of the place, leaving very little for Landry to do except throw the occasional jerk out of her bar, hang out at the Chiefs' Club on the base, or every now and then play a round of golf.

McCoy, on the other hand, hated the PI as much as his old buddy loved it. He saluted the OOD, saluted the Flag, and left the ship. It was early afternoon and the rain had slacked off, so he decided to walk. Six weeks at sea, and it felt good just to be on solid ground again.

After passing through the gate the chief entered the squalid town, and noticed it was even more wretched than usual. They were attempting to do some kind of half-assed repair to their miserable excuse for a road; maybe putting in an underground power line? In any event, Magsaysay was completely torn up with big piles of dirt here and there standing next to their forgotten water-filled mosquito and malaria infested holes. What kind of morons would attempt a project like this during the monsoons? The chief shook his head disgustedly and thought it was about as efficient as three monkeys trying to fuck a football.

The jitney drivers were oblivious to it all and sped up and down the soggy street with their full loads of drunken squids, up to their hubs in muck, flinging sludge out in every direction. Woe to you, and especially

your tropical white uniform, if you were standing in the wrong place at the wrong time.

HE SAUNTERED UP to the Shangri-La. It was just like he remembered it, bigger than most, but then again, so was its owner. Before he went in he scanned the other side of the street, and sure enough, the infamous Kit Kat Klub was two doors down. Landry was waiting for his old pal and jumped up the minute he saw McCoy coming through the door. He charged over and grabbed the much smaller chief in a big bear hug, lifting him completely off the ground.

“Come on George, yer gonta break my ribs!”

“Sorry, Jimbo, I forgots how little you is.”

“Dadgumit, everbody’s little next ta yew, but I’m still big enough ta kick yer sorry ass!”

George sat back down and roared with laughter, the tin roof shook with it. If he had but one eye in the center of his forehead, he could have passed for a much larger than normal dark brown Cyclops. Children turned their heads and clutched their mothers tightly when they saw him coming. This might have had as much to do with the thick knife scar that ran from his left ear down to his chin, as it did with his monumental size.

“Still da same old banty rooster, I sees! Dali, bring Master Chief Boat-swain’s Mate James McCoy a beer!”

She did so quickly, for she liked the smart and thoughtful chief who was so different from her giant, rowdy husband, and never tired of listening to their stories of the bad old days in Korea.

“Only if y’all have one with us,” said McCoy.

She went back to the bar, got a San Miguel for herself and joined the men at the table.

McCoy asked, “Yew heered what happened on our last patrol?”

“Ah did. It don’t take long fo’ word of somethin’ like dat ta cross da puddle. Way we heered it, long story short, some VC smugglers tried ta get da

jump on your boardin' crew and ended up as chum. What's wrong with dose people, a junk takin' on a destroyer? Dat's like bringin' a knife ta a gunfight."

"That about covers it. They ain't a whole lot different than the Koreans or Chinese Communists was. They be determined little shits through and through, and they don't mind dyin' fer the cause especially if they can take some a us with 'em. Other thing is most of 'em don't wear no uniforms, and the kids are in it too, jist like with the Hitler Youth. Only war we ever been in where ya cain't tell the enemy from civilians. If it weren't fer Palmer, it woulda ended a lot different."

"Dat's one crazy son-of-a-bitch, hell, he even make me nervous, but dere ain't no better man ta have at your back in a fight."

"Yew trained him good, George, he saved ever' one a their lives."

"I's glad to hear dat, Jimbo, but you better gets used ta it. Dis one's gonna gets a whole lot worse befo' it gets better. When dose Viet Cong threw da French out a 'Nam in da early 1950's, dey killed damn near as many of dem as da Germans did in World War Two. Dey fights under a black flag, and if we gonna win, we gots ta fight dem da same way. Dat whole country should be one big Free Fire Zone from one end ta da other."

The conversation quieted as they thought about it and drank some of their San Miguels. Landry changed the subject.

"What else's on your mind, Jimbo? I knows how you hates dis town. Da last two times here, you made us meets you at da Chiefs' Club, so I knows dis is more den a social call."

McCoy sighed, and said, "Yer too right about that, George. I could use a little a yer help. First time here, a few a my apes got in a scrape with some Marines."

Landry laughed again, "Dat ain't no big deal, unless dey couldn't handle it."

"Nah, the boys done good. The jarheads give 'em some shit, so my apes caught 'em cold, sucker punched 'em, got 'em down on the floor, put the boots to 'em, and got out quick and clean."

George smiled, and said, “Don’t sound like no kinda problem ta me, Jimbo.”

“It’s a little more complicated than that....”

“Okay, start at da beginning.”

“Well, it started across the street at the Kit Kat Klub.”

“Oh, hell, I told Dali dere was gonna be trouble when dose Marine maggots turned dat bar into der own personal clubhouse.”

McCoy briefed George and Dali on the situation. When he finished George said, “Now dat you mention it, dat ain’t da first time I heered about da gate guards doin’ dat, but da problem is, it’s always der word against da ones dey beat on.”

“My apes ain’t a lyin’!”

“Hold your horses, Jimbo. I believes you, and maybe now’s da time ta do somethin’ about it.”

A lopsided smile flashed across McCoy’s face. He raised his bottle in a silent toast and said, “I was hopin’ yew’d say that, George.” Then he turned to Dalisay and got right down to business, “Do yew know any a the girls who work at the Kat?”

“Me know alla girls in alla bars!” she replied indignantly.

“Then git on the drums. We need ta know everthin’ yew can find out about them assholes, especially that pimple-faced lance corporal. He’s their ringleader. What days is he on duty? What days and times he comes ta the Kat? What’s the slowest time of day when he’s likely ta be there? I need ta know the best time ta catch him and his pals. Scuttlebutt has it we be here fer ten days....”

Dali interrupted him. Every bar girl has a more accurate knowledge of ships moving in and out of their ports than any admiral. “No, Jimbo, youa gonna be here twelva day.”

McCoy took her word as gospel. “Suppose we meet in five days at eighteen-hundred back at the Chiefs’ Club? I’ll buy yew both the biggest steaks y’all ever ate.”

“We’ll be dere, Boats. Whatever you needs, you gots.”

They shook hands, and the chief left quickly before Landry could grab ahold of him and try to break his ribs again.

DALISAY GOT RIGHT to it. She was a good Navy wife and regarded Marines the same way her husband did. The few jarheads who darkened her door learned mosh skosh this was a Navy bar, and they neva, neva come back! She was a highly respected “Momma-san,” which was a senior tribal troubleshooter, Far Eastern style. She was also the unofficial judge for the entire bar girl population of Olongapo, and her word carried the weight of law.

Dali thought about handling the problem herself. She had ordered hits from time to time when rough justice for the hookers demanded it. It was all too simple really. When the usually drunk and unwary offender passed by one of Olongapo’s all too numerous dark alleys, a butterfly knife gleamed redly as the sentence was carried out. Beatings for lesser but still serious infractions were not unheard of. Over the years she had formed tight relationships with many of the security police, and knew who to turn to when she needed something like this done. After all, their interests overlapped. But Dali decided not to. It would be disrespectful to interfere. McCoy was her husband’s oldest and best friend. They owed him a debt that could never be repaid.

It had not been easy for her husband, a Negro, to achieve the exalted rank of chief, especially in his chosen field which was populated predominantly with southern hillbillies who loved their guns. Prejudice had been Landry’s companion since his first days in boot camp. Weapons and First Divisions worked closely together, and from the start, McCoy, a “South shall rise again, by God” rebel, had befriended him. George told Dali he was the only colorblind redneck he’d ever met. George didn’t think McCoy realized he was black.

They had fought back to back in bars throughout the Far East whenever and wherever they encountered mouthy bigots who were unable to keep

their racist comments to themselves. McCoy may have looked scrawny, but how that man could scrap. It wasn't the size of the dog in the fight, but the size of the fight in the dog. From time to time, her weary husband may have been willing to let an untoward remark slide, but not so McCoy. Neva, neva. So no, she would let Boats take care of it himself. He must save face, but she would find out what he needed to know. That was the least she could do for him.

She called Miri over and told her, "Youa go ovah to da Kat. See iffa Chona be dere. Hava her comma here afta work."

Miri bowed her head obediently, turned, and immediately left.

AT THE CHIEFS' CLUB they met at the bar, got a table, and ordered the twenty-two ounce rib-eyes. Dalisay would never finish hers but George had that covered. Once they settled in with their drinks, the conversation quickly turned to business.

They put their heads together and Dali quietly said, "Da pimple face guard youa wan issa Lance Corporal Marvin Boudreau. Dey worka three day on and two day off. He hava girl at da Kat, but she no lika him. He treat her bad and cheat her outta money alla time. He puncha and slappa her alla time. Day afta tomorrow he no work. He be inna Kat by sixteen-hundred. Maybe dere be sixa otha jarheads ina dere. Maybe more. You takka him at seventeen-thirty. I makka sure dey alla drunk by den. I fixa it so bar guard gonna go out for monkey meat, butta Boudreau's girl, Anela, she gonna stay. She wanna makka sure he hurt big time."

They sat back, ate what they could of their steaks and George polished off the leftovers. When he finished eating, Landry had a few thoughts to add, and then Dali told McCoy, "Boats, youa ana you boys comma to Shangri-La half-a-hour before. I makka sure Boudreau be inna Kat."

On the way out, McCoy handed Landry a gym bag, "Take this back ta the bar fer me, will yew?"

“Sure, what you got in here, a coupla pounds a heroin? A Thompson?”

“Nah, nothin’ like that, George, jist half a dozen fids,” and they both chuckled knowingly.

“I’s got somethin’ fo’ you too, Jimbo,” He reached into his pocket and took out an envelope containing a small pile of USS Black shoulder rocker patches, which he handed over to his friend. “Just like da old days, huh Boats?”

“Yew got that right, Guns. It’s time ta rock and roll.”

AFTER RETURNING to the ship McCoy went down to the First Division compartment, woke up Slocum, and brought him topside to the forecandle. They discussed tactics for the upcoming engagement at the Kit Kat Klub. The chief went from there directly to the Weapons Department compartment and had a similar conversation with Palmer.

THE NEXT MORNING, after Quarters, Slocum held back Zack, Howell, Schmidt, Ames, Gelman, and Hill. He brought them down to the boatswain’s locker, and booted out the ape who ran it. He told them all, “This here be an unofficial raidin’ party. Tomorrow we’re gonta go over and git pay-back from them jarheads who put a hurtin’ on Howell and Martin. The Chief’s been scopin’ it out and we know right where and when ta catch those maggots when they be least expectin’ it. We’re gonta make them wish they was never born. We’re gonta rip them brand new assholes big enough fer this here ship ta drive in and park. Ames, and Schmidt, if yew ain’t feelin’ up ta it, take off. No big deal.”

They both grinned widely, and Ames said, “Wouldn’t miss it for the world, Boats.”

The truth was they had been down in the dumps since the sinking of the cargo junk, not because they felt bad about it, but because they felt stupid. They believed they had let everyone down. Giang never even chewed them out, never said anything about it at all, but they both had the impression

he was holding back because they had been wounded. Had they not, they thought, he would have flayed them alive.

That Cong crew had gotten the drop on them, and they'd been paying for it with every painful breath ever since. They wanted pay-back of their own. Anybody would do. As Dali would say, they needed to save face, and the thought of stomping the crap out of some jarheads who had worked over some of their fellow apes, cheered them right up. After all, what are friends for?

"We're okay and we're in," said Schmidt.

"All right then. Anyone else want out?"

When no one left, he told them, "This here may be unofficial, but it's still gonta be run like a Naval Mission. There be two objectives here. The first is ta kick the bejesum out a them pukes and put 'em in the hospital fer the rest a the time we be in WesPac. The second is not ta git put in the brig fer it. Of course, if any of us do git picked off by the Shore Patrol, yew don't know squat. Yew stopped in fer a beer, and the place went crazy; no matter what, we be innocent. Them Marines started it.

"Now remember, I'm talkin' about inflictin' major damage, with broken heads and bones. I'm talkin' about revisin' their low opinion of squids upward ta the point where they wet their britches ever' time they see a sailor again. If yew don't have the stomach fer it yew can leave right now, and maybe the Chief can git yew a job as a friggin' yeoman, or maybe a radioman, because yew sure as hell ain't worthy ta be a deck ape. Do yew know why the Navy has the Boatswain's Mate ratin'?"

When no one answered, he bellowed at them, "BECAUSE, THEY DON'T HAVE NO RATIN' FER BAD-ASSES!!!"

Then he handed them each a USS Black shoulder patch.

"After knock-off tonight, run over ta the base and buy yew two new white hats, and a dress white jumper two sizes bigger than yew usually wear. Bring 'em back and stencil any other names on 'em but yer own. Then sew the patches I jist give yew on them jumpers. Anybody sees yew in 'em, they'll

think yew be off the Black, not the Hawke. Tomorrow when we go into Olongapo, yer gonta wear one of them new hats. The other one yer gonta stick under yer belt in the back and whatever yew do, DO NOT fergit to bring them jumpers with yew.

“We’ll be meetin’ at the Shangri-La, which is almost directly across the street from the Kit Kat Klub. Yew might not know exactly where it’s at, but I damn sure know Martin and Howell do, so ask ‘em. Be there between sixteen-forty-five and seventeen-hundred. When yew git there, knock on the door. It won’t be open yet. Do not, and I say again, do not come all together. Go out the gate singly, and git ta the Shangri-La singly. We’ll brief yew there. Jist remember: no matter how well a mission is set up, after the first shot’s fired, everthin’ always goes ta shit. If ya wanta be standin’ at the end of the day, ya got ta be ready ta improvise, now git yer useless asses topside and turn-to!”

THE APES had been slowly trickling into the Shangri-La. When they were fully assembled, instructions were given, questions asked and answered. Jumpers with patches identifying them as crew members of the USS Black were put on right over their tropical white shirts. Gelman and Palmer would remain outside as lookouts. They were also tasked with keeping any and all Marines inside until the raid was finished. They were to set their watches, give a heads up at four minutes, and make sure the party was out in five.

The apes were issued fids, which were a twenty-inch long piece of hard hickory wood used to splice heavy line. The top was well rounded, about three-inches in diameter and tapered down to a point at the other end. They were shaped like a short, squat pool cue. Every ape knew it was a wicked weapon in a fight. They stuffed them up their jumper sleeves for the walk across the street.

Just before the security cop was scheduled to walk away, they watched with sinking hearts as a group of four snipes strolled into the Kat. All eyes watched the chiefs with uncertainty. Landry shrugged his shoulders with a grin. They both saw it as a plus, and McCoy told them, “Don’t yew worry

about them none. When that cop leaves, yew git on over and see ta it that those damn jarhead's next duty station's the hospital."

THE SNIPES, led by a large, tough looking Third Class Boiler Tender who looked like trouble, walked into the Kat, and saw two tables of Marines: five at one table, six at another. About half had girls on their laps and it looked like they were getting their knobs polished right there. Friggin' jarheads probably too cheap to get hotel rooms, but wow, these girls were hot! One of the Marines started right in, "Shag your asses outta here mosh skosh. This here's a Marine watering hole!"

The snipes weren't in the least bit intimidated. What servicemen from other branches of the military don't seem to understand about lower echelon sailors is that it's never a real good idea for anyone lacking the proper authority to tell them what to do. During a forty-five day patrol, snipes and apes couldn't possibly count the number of orders they were given. Hundreds? Thousands? That and the grueling working hours under harsh, dangerous conditions shortened fuses that were already too short to begin with. So, when they finally returned to port and were off the ship, they were also off the chain. Bossing around a squid on liberty was like lighting a stick of dynamite and expecting it not to explode.

The big snipe smiled at his pals, and said, "Someone talking to us? I'm thirsty. You guys wanna sit down and have a beer?" They took a table and ordered San Miguels all around. He then addressed himself to the Marine who had challenged them saying, "This is the way it works, friend. We're gonna have a few drinks here. You mind your business and we'll mind ours. Live and let live, Semper fi and all that shit." The snipes put their heads together for a quick war council. They knew an attack was not only inevitable, but imminent.

Jarheads are pack animals. Alone or in lesser numbers they are often friendly, but when they outnumber a foe, they undergo a radical change. They become feral. They rarely fight in bars recreationally unless certain of victory.

THE GIRLS were following their own instructions from Dali: “Youa sita onna dere laps and wiggle onna dem. Youa whisper inna dere ears whata youa gonna do ta dem inna hotel rooms. Youa makka dem hot and sweaty and not able to stana up. Youa stay onna dere laps for long asa youa can. When apes comma trough da doors, youa jumpa up, pusha dere chairs ovah backawards and dena youa run!”

The Marines had turned out to be a bunch of obnoxious cheap-asses, and the girls of the Kat were on the same page with Dali and the squids. They wanted them gone too, and realized this was their golden opportunity. They were professionals so they followed their Momma-san’s orders to the letter with much enthusiasm and gusto.

LANCE CORPORAL BOUDREAU couldn’t believe his good fortune. Anela had been trying to get rid of him ever since he refused to pay her for sex. Told her she wasn’t worth the price. Then he discovered and stole her stash of pesos, holding the fat pocket book out of reach over her head mockingly as he did so. She got really pissed off, but calmed down after he slapped her around some. He smirked to himself, they always do. Now here she was buying him drinks, squirming on his lap and whispering things in his ear that’d make a sailor blush. Like most bitches, he thought, she liked it rough.

His little brain was so occupied that he hardly noticed when the snipes walked in. The Marines were lambs being led to slaughter.

Suddenly the double doors banged open and Slocum followed closely by Schmidt, Ames, and Hill came rushing in. The girls jumped up and three of them successfully shoved over their soon to be ex-boyfriends’ chairs. The apes quickly identified Boudreau. They ran up to his table and before he or the other gate guards realized what was happening, Slocum gave the sexually dazed lance corporal a powerful downward blow to his nose breaking it instantly. Blood shot out everywhere. Another crack of the fid laid him right out. Meanwhile, the rest of Slocum’s crew was efficiently putting everyone else at that table out of commission as well.

A Marine whose seat had been pushed over backwards started to scramble up and Ames stopped him with a couple of hard kicks to his gut followed by another to his head. He moved on to the next grunt blocking several wildly thrown punches, then found the opening he needed to smash him across the jaw with his fid. Teeth, saliva, and blood flew in all directions. The next shot sent his adversary's eyeballs rolling back and he hit the deck like a sack of sand.

It was everything Anela had hoped for and more. It was all she could do not to shout out with glee: howa you like getta beata widda big stick? Now youa know whata feel like when youa beata me! With a happy smile and a great deal of pleasure she watched Hill and Schmidt methodically pound the crap out of Boudreau.

The snipes couldn't believe their good fortune. They had no use for topside sailors, no use for them at all, but they liked jarheads even less. In fact they hated jarheads. And here these apes were ever so nicely providing them with the perfect opportunity to vent all of their repressed hostility and rage. The big one jumped up, grabbed a stool, swung it against the bar, ripped it apart, distributed the legs to his brethren, and they waded into the fray. The Marines in the Kat were just as unprepared for this savage attack as the Navy had been at Pearl Harbor.

OUT FRONT, Palmer and Gelman stood back-to-back intently watching Magsaysay. Gelman poked Palmer with his elbow and exclaimed, "Uh oh! Here comes the stinkin' Shore Patrol!" And sure enough, there they were. Palmer swiftly took ahold of Gelman's jumper and began flinging him about. Gelman hollered, "Guns, Guns, what the hell're you doin'? We gotta warn 'em inside!"

Shore Patrol are trained to notice any unusual activities or behaviors, like predatory fish watching for abnormal movement in a bait school. Their eyes locked onto Palmer like barracudas on an injured minnow.

Palmer ignored Gelman's words and none too gently threw him down onto the side of the muddy road. By now the Shore Patrol were coming at a trot blowing their whistles. Palmer reached over, faked taking Gelman's wallet

from his front pocket, and took off at a dead run with the SPs following in hot pursuit.

“STOP, STOP!”

So focused were they on pursuing their fleeing prey, they ran right by the alleged victim, and never looked once through the front window of the Kat, which was already in ruins. Gelman picked himself up, looked at his watch, opened the door and yelled, “One minute left!”

WHEN THE APES left the Shangri-La, McCoy, Landry, and Dali got beers, and sat at a table by the front window facing Magsaysay. “Ringside seats,” said Landry. They didn’t say much as they closely watched their plan unfold. They saw the apes run into the Kat while Martin and Howell hung back but within seconds they entered, so they knew that the lance corporal and his inner circle had been immobilized. Out of nowhere they saw Palmer pick up Gelman and start tossing him around like a rag-doll. Then they watched him shove the ape to the ground and root around in his pocket. “What in the Sam Hill...” said McCoy, and then the SPs came running into their field of view. When Palmer jumped up and took off, they laughed until they cried. “I seen a lotta tings, but never no move like dat. Dem SPs gonna be findin’ demselves in a whole world of hurt, real quick,” Landry predicted when he could finally talk.

“Ain’t that the truth, George. They’d be a whole lot better off in a cage full a hungry gators.”

INSIDE, all resistance had been crushed. The apes were dispassionately finishing the mission while displaying all the emotions of cooks baking bread. The big snipe tried to protest, “Hey guys, enough’s enough.”

Everyone stopped. All ape heads turned and stared unblinkingly at them, fids paused where they were, some in mid-air. Slocum fixed him with an evil look, and said harshly, “Git lost snipe, unless yew boys want some yerself. This here be pay-back.”

“You boys from the Black sure play hard.”

“We ain’t a playin’ and yew better git on outta here while yew still can.”

Without another word they headed to the doors and Gelman let them out as the apes went back to work.

PALMER had about a twenty-five yard lead on the hounds when he cut down an alleyway. There were no lights behind the bars and he concealed himself in the darkness. When his pursuers left Magsaysay, they lost sight of him and slowed down looking warily every which way.

When they passed the gunner’s hiding place, he exploded out bashing one on the head with a handy metal garbage can. Then he pulled back from a hard roundhouse right thrown by his partner, who staggered when he didn’t connect with his intended target. As the fist sailed harmlessly by his smiling face, Palmer kicked the off balanced SP’s feet out from under him sending him crashing to the ground, and bending down with his fid, walloped him twice on the head, knocking him out cold.

He then turned his attention back to the one he had stunned with the garbage can and almost faster than the eye could see, gave him a wicked elbow strike to the forehead, dropping him right in his tracks. Palmer took a moment to check them over and it was obvious they’d be out of action for the rest of the night.

Not bad, he thought a bit smugly, two down in less than half a minute. But, he was quite disappointed by their overall poor performance. He had been looking forward to this little bout and it was over much too soon to suit him.

“That’s all you got?” he said, while he took their forty-fives out of their holsters and threw them skittering down the garbage strewn alley. He hoped the rats didn’t find them first. They were so big here they just might shoot the SPs and eat ‘em. It’d take these two sleeping beauties at least twenty minutes to wake up and another hour to find their pistols in the foul smelling, rat infested darkness. McCoy’s raiders would be long gone by then. Now that the threat had been neutralized, Palmer turned and quickly jogged back up to Magsaysay Drive.

GELMAN PUSHED OPEN the doors and yelled, “Times up! Move it! MOVE IT!” On the way out Howell picked up the remnants of a stool, throwing it into the mirror behind the bar, which shattered into thousands of pieces and either broke or knocked over almost all of the liquor bottles standing in front of it. “That’s what they get for aiding and abetting the enemy,” he said to Zack as he turned and shouted back into the destroyed bar, “Semper fi, muthah fuckahs!” They were both laughing when they reached the sidewalk and headed in opposite directions.

The apes left the bar as calmly and orderly as a high school fire drill. Those who had lost hats in the melee donned their spares. Some jumped into the ever present procession of jitneys, while others mingled with the crowds and drifted away into the night. When they put a safe enough distance between themselves and the Kat, they found dark alleys in which to discard and conceal their jumpers and fids.

AFTER THE APES LEFT, Anela came out from the back room and surveyed the wreckage. It’d be a good long while before the Kat would be ready to open again.

She walked over to the unconscious Boudreau, squatted down next to him, and struggling with his greater bulk, flipped him onto his back. She then reached into his pocket, fished out his billfold and took from it her stolen wad of cash, all the while daintily trying not to get blood on herself. Next, Anela spread his legs wide apart. She then stood up, positioned herself in between his knees, and lining herself up like the Green Bay Packers’ punter going for a forty-yard field goal, brought her tiny, pointed, size four red patent leather spike-heeled right foot way back, way way back, and then remembering every vicious thing this Marine had ever done to her, using every ounce of strength in her small body, she kicked him squarely in his testicles.

Even though the unbearable pain from the terrible beating had already rendered him deeply unconscious, Boudreau made a horrible noise, a cross between a moan and a wail that sounded more bovine than human as he

somehow managed to turn slowly onto his side, curling into a tight fetal position. Reflexively rolling over may have saved his life, otherwise he could have choked on his own blood. Had Anela known that, she very well might have flopped him back over again.

She smiled as she inspected her work and was pleased with what she saw. She limped out of the Kat favoring her right foot and crossed over Magsaysay to the Shangri-La to apply for a new job.

AT QUARTERS the next morning the boatswains were in high humor. Even Ensign Wells, who supposedly knew nothing, clearly knew it all, and he was proud of his division. “The Fighting First,” had once again shown their mettle. Chief McCoy told Zack and Howell, “Yew two chikin fuckers can go over ta Olongapo now but don’t go gittin’ yer sorry asses in no more trouble.”

“Aye, Aye, Chief!”

LATER IN THE DAY, two burly ONI detectives locked down the USS Black, and began looking for those of her crew who had participated in the savage bar fight at the Kit Kat Klub. The investigation ultimately fizzled out, but it did keep the sullen crew from going on the beach for a week.

THAT EVENING Martin and Howell went to the Acme Club. Needless-to-say, they didn’t see any Marines they recognized guarding the gate. Howell said to Zack as they went through, “I hope those sons-a-bitches spend the rest of their lives in traction.” Zack answered, “No joke, Howell, they probably will.”

Lailani was there and unoccupied. She brought them beers as they took a table, and sat with them. They tried to find out how Kearns and Liezel were doing but it was absolutely the only topic Lailani and the other girls refused to discuss. It would be years before they’d get the scoop.



CHAPTER 14

IN THE DARKNESS, Private Phan stood sentry on the outskirts of the fortified fishing village of Do Nuoc. Even though it was raining he didn't care. Simply being above ground held an element of pleasure and relief for him. Things were not going well for the Cong lately and that didn't trouble him either. He had come to hate Communism in general and his squad's deeds in particular. The other troops were hardened to the casual cruelty of Sergeant Trinh, but Phan now realized whose cause was more just. His family moved to North Vietnam while he was still a young boy, and until the NVA sent him south, he had never been exposed to any other form of government. What he saw here was a kinder, gentler way of life, a way of life the Communists were doing everything in their power to eliminate and crush. It gradually dawned on him that he was on the wrong side of this war.

Do Nuoc was the first village inland on the Song Vo River. When they had been sent here it was politically split. However, those who disagreed

with their new overlords quickly learned to shut their mouths, or move away altogether. It was no easy task turning a peaceful fishing community into a military installation right in the enemy's heartland, and to all outward appearances, it continued to maintain the veneer of its former normalcy.

Kilometers of tunnels and chambers were built with soldiers digging side by side with civilians. The Cong leaders discouraged fraternization but under the circumstances it would have been difficult for some of them not to have developed close ties.

There were three crews engaged in the work: the diggers and drillers were in the forefront, another group followed behind them shoring up the excavation with bamboo, and then came the never-ending line of peasants removing the debris in baskets. When the diggers hit pockets of soft dirt, they advanced much too quickly for the others to keep up. This created dangerous stretches of unstable passageways and as a result, Phan had been buried alive by one of the numerous cave-ins. Although grateful, he couldn't understand why a coworker, Hua Dai, dug him out. In the Far-East, life was not considered sacred like it is in the Western world. With the exception of Hua, no one who witnessed Phan's predicament attempted to help him. In the Asian way, they would have left him to his fate.

The two men became friends, and in a cautious manner each admitted rejecting Communism. Hua's cousin was an officer in the Junk Forces. One thing led to another, and they were soon spying for him. Little by little they mapped out the entire labyrinth, and noted the locations of the mine fields and booby traps. These drawings were entrusted to an ancient fisherman who most likely traded them to Division 22 for cigarettes. Phan shuddered at the thought that should they be discovered, Trinh would inflict hideously painful ways in which he and Hua would slowly die.

As he patrolled his beat in the rainy darkness, Phan considered the promise he had been given: after the threat of Do Nuoc had been neutralized, he would be welcomed into the ranks of the Junk Forces if he could prove his loyalty by killing Sergeant Trinh.

SERGEANT TRINH looked around the village of Do Nuoc with much satisfaction, and thought to himself, all was well here. He knew the key to successful survival always lay with the tunnels. The badger was the fiercest animal in the jungle. He, too, lived in the earth, and woe to those who confronted him near his lair. Dig them deep enough and nothing could penetrate. Disguise the entries well enough, and they could not be found. Trinh knew his underground fortress was indestructible.

Do Nuoc was also of strategic importance because of its quick access to the sea. The round-eyes' ships had throttled coastal Cong smuggling activities, but some supplies still made it through the blockade. Officials in Hanoi were aware of his subterranean base and used it as a weapons and troop staging center. Sergeant Trinh smiled while he thought of the many patrols that had passed through the sleepy looking fishing village without so much as a hint of its true nature.

Trinh knew the day was coming when he would face off with the Junk Forces and their damn White Devil Ship. It was inevitable, and when that day came he would give them something to remember.

THE HAWKE lay-to in Qui Nhon Harbor. Lieutenants Giang, Hammond and Captain Foley were ashore for a meeting with Division 22's CO, Commander Nguyen Xuan Duc and his Naval Advisor, Lieutenant Commander Daltry. The room was airy with several ceiling fans turning idly. Against one long wall was a bank of state of the art communication equipment and radar screens. They were tended by a group of enlisted men wearing both U.S. and Vietnamese uniforms, but all wore the Junk Force berets. The officers sat on cushioned rattan chairs grouped around a conference table smoking and drinking coffee laced with scotch.

Daltry was saying, "We've been chasing Sergeant Trinh for months. His outfit should be called Murder, Incorporated. He doesn't care who he kills: civilians or military, man, woman, or child, and he loves to torture. He's a sick bastard, and everyone is terrified of him. He needs to be taken off the

board. The ARVN put a price on his head, but every time we cast a net, he always slips through.

“We know he’s up in Do Nuoc now. We have reliable Intel coming out of there that tells us he’s taken over the whole town and turned it into a VC stronghold. We have the complete layout, and the son-of-a-bitch dug the biggest set of tunnels this side of Yokosuka, Japan. They’re using it as a distribution center for weapons, food, and personnel. It’s supposedly so damn big you could park an F-4 in it.”

Captain Foley leaned forward, “What can we do to help?”

Daltry lit up a cigarette and said, “We’ve all heard about your work in Vung Tao. We’ve been thinking along those lines, except down there you stopped the VC from attacking. This time we want you to keep them from getting away. We’re going to bottle them up big time. When we commence this little shindig, we’ll have your guns clear a wide swath of open ground around the village. Commander Nguyen’s men will be concealed behind the hooches; back far enough for safety, but close enough to move in fast. Right before you begin shelling, they’ll mark their locations with smoke grenades so your fire control spotters will know exactly where they are. After you have completed your task, they’ll move forward and post a tight perimeter guard around the entire village, while the rest of them will force everybody down to the river. The night before we’ll position a group of armed junks where they can stop any attempts to retreat upstream, and your ship will block off all seaward escape.

“Once we’ve identified and winnowed out the Cong, we’ll evacuate the civilians and then we want you to turn Do Nuoc and Trinh’s hidey-hole into the Vietnamese equivalent of the Grand Canyon. Unfortunately there is one potential fly in the ointment. We were unable to get the actual depth of the tunnels, therefore we aren’t entirely sure your projectiles can knock them out, so don’t spare the ammo. Blanket the whole area with all you’ve got. Once the VC figure out what we’re up to, they’ll jump down into those burrows quicker than woodchucks with the willies, and, we have it on good authority that they’ve stored away enough rice to survive for a long time....A

very long time. Gentlemen, getting the Communists out of Do Nuoc is going to be like trying to get rats out of a dump.”

A mess cook appeared and left a fresh pot of coffee on the table. They passed around the bottle of scotch and refilled their cups, quietly thinking it over.

Then Lieutenant Giang spoke up, “I have a suggestion, sir.”

“You always do,” Daltry replied wryly. “Go ahead, Lieutenant.”

“Thank you, sir. As a precaution, we could contact the Air Force at Phu Cat, and see if they’d put a squadron of F-100 Super Sabre ‘Huns’ on standby for us. If we can’t wipe those tunnels out, napalm might do it.”

His suggestion didn’t sit well with the other men. Asking the Air Force for help was like broadcasting that the Navy couldn’t handle its own mission. Captain Foley’s red coloring started deepening, but the more they thought about it, the more sense it made. Besides, they’d only call them out if all else failed.

The finer details were discussed and agreed upon, then the three Hawke officers returned to the destroyer to make arrangements to rendezvous with the USS Mars, an ammo ship, to fill their magazines with powder, White Phosphorous and AAC Fragmentation shells.

IN THE JUNGLE behind Do Nuoc, Sergeant Trinh was on his way to a meeting of his own. He knew an attack was imminent. He had a highly placed informant in the ARVN who had tipped him off, but he wasn’t worried. After studying the Hawke, he had formed a plan. Pin-point precision was not a thing he had thus far observed from her cannons. They blew up whole towns, not single buildings. He did not have the resources to employ the same tactic, so he would use accuracy to bring her harm. Besides, it was not the weapons of war that provided the gravest danger, but rather those skilled in their usage.

Four men and six women silently stepped out of the jungle into the clearing, startling the sergeant. They were dressed not so much in camo as

they were in the jungle itself. With bits of trees, brush, and leaves sewed loosely on their uniforms they looked more like moving bushes than they did soldiers. Trinh's skills were first rate, but he hadn't seen them until they wanted to be seen.

This was the sniper team he had requested from Hanoi, and he would be the only one who knew of their presence. Their leader had been given the name "Apache" by the invaders. She would rather capture than kill, and her sadistic acts were legendary. Like the Chiricahua Apaches of the Old West, she always tortured her victims within hearing range of their units, so her preys' brothers-in-arms would be forced to hear their screams of agony throughout the endless night.

The snipers were carrying German Karabiner 98K rifles fitted with Zeiss scopes, compliments of their comrades, the Russians. These rifles were normally accurate to one-thousand meters, but theirs had been specially machined and could hit bulls-eyes at fifteen-hundred. They fired the larger, more powerful 7.92x57mm cartridge. Their spotters were equipped with AK-47s.

Trinh and Apache discussed the coming operation and he provided her with a detailed map of the area. Then she and her team melted back into the jungle.

THREE MORNINGS LATER, the sunrise created streaks of pinks, purples, and other pastel colors rarely seen in the skies outside of Vietnam. The steep verdant mountains were hazy with fog, but as the sun began its ascent, the mist rose with it. The sea birds were awake and letting their presence be known with their shrill cries as the Hawke cut silently through the calm, blue seas toward the white sand beaches of Do Nuoc. It was as if God Himself was highlighting the remarkable beauty of this picturesque country that mankind had turned into a living hell.

The Captain had not called out General Quarters yet, even though land was in sight and the coast was growing larger. Let them sleep, he thought. The ship had been burning the candle at both ends, and his crew would

need all their strength for this mission. Today would be a long day, even if they finished by noon. He needed them well rested, focused, and ready.

SEVEN OF DIVISION 22'S JUNKS had taken advantage of the moonless night and slipped upstream and hidden themselves. Commander Nguyen had brought along his pride and joy, his thirty-six foot Yabuta command junk with a draft of only two feet. It was armed with two Brownings: a .50 and .30, and was manned by six of his fiercest sailors. He was spoiling for a fight. The higher the sun rose, the more annoyed he became. Even though it was well before their agreed upon rendezvous time, he impatiently wondered, where the hell was the Hawke? He ordered his troops to make ready their weapons.

APACHE had positioned her five virtually invisible sniper teams where she thought they could do maximum damage to the Devil Ship and the Junk Forces. She lamented the fact that this particular assignment would preclude the taking and torturing of prisoners, but her orders were to inflict maximum damage and exfiltrate at the first sign of naval bombardment or Air Force involvement. Already her spotters were searching for targets.

SERGEANT TRINH wasn't the only one who knew an attack was coming. Private Phan spent the night as a sentry on the village's shore and had heard muffled sounds and whispered voices coming off the water which could only be the Junk Forces working their way upstream. As dawn broke, he was allowed to sleep in the shallow, flea-infested trench in front of Do Nuoc, but the flow of adrenaline kept him wide awake, and he couldn't stop himself from going over and over again what he must do to survive. Phan knew the moment the battle began would be his only chance to strike. Like Apache, he too must kill and fade into the jungle.

Phan was part of a group that had been ordered to hold the beach with RPDs. Should any of the enemy approach, they were to open fire and the fishermen and other civilians be damned. The only reason any of them

were still alive was because the men were a ready source of labor, and the women could be forced to provide other necessary physical comforts. All were useful as human shields. As always, the sergeant would be right behind his troops, ready to shoot any who were less than stalwart in their defense of the motherland. Retreat was not a word in Trinh's vocabulary.

EXCEPT FOR THE RIVERFRONT and a very narrow strip of cleared ground around the village, Do Nuoc was surrounded by thick forests. These people lived primarily off the sea, not the land, and the terrain encircling their community remained untouched, uncultivated and wild.

Most of the fishermen had already set out, and everyone else was awake and at work. Men were repairing fishing junks and nets while women were preparing fish either by drying them on racks or fermenting them for sauce in large crocks. Others headed into the surrounding jungle to harvest wild fruits and honey.

AT THE PREARRANGED TIME, the Hawke rounded the corner and entered the mouth of the Song Vo. Captain Foley finally called out General Quarters. As sailors began running to their stations 7.92x57mm slugs began pounding into the ship loudly ricocheting off thick steel bulkheads, decks and overhangs. Back at Mount fifty-two, Slocum had correctly assessed the situation. At the gun's hatch he began shouting to his rapidly approaching crew, "We're takin' fire! Come on, come on, damn yew, move yer asses!"

ROUNDS WERE SLAMMING into the sides of both turrets, but the Hawke was moving fast over calm yet rolling seas. The snipers had never before been assigned targets on the water, and much to their frustration, were unable to make kills.

GRETSKY, A GUNNER'S MATE and one of Mount fifty-two's powder men, dashed down the main deck like an Olympic sprinter readying to cross

the finish line and a pinging ricochet caught him in the side of his head. Blood flew everywhere and he went down like a puppet with its strings cut.

Without thinking Slocum jumped out of the mount, grabbed two handfuls of the stricken sailor's shirt, and leaving a trail of blood, dragged him through the nearest door into the main passageway. Thank yew, Lord Jesus, he silently prayed in thanksgiving that the Damage Control Men hurrying toward them had not yet dogged down the door. Slocum hollered, "Take him down ta Doc Phillips in the wardroom! Move damn yew!" then he was off, back out the door, and onto the main deck once again running for his life on his way back to the safety of the mount.

After he threw himself through the hatch, shaken but unscathed, he told his crew, "We gonta blow them sons-a-whores ta Kingdom Come. Let's go men, git ready!"

HOWELL WAS STARBOARD LOOKOUT when the Hawke made for the mouth of the Song Vo. He notified the bridge when he saw the six smaller junks and the Yabuta racing toward the village. Suddenly, something smacked into the bulkhead behind him and bounced away with a whirring sound, and only then did he hear the crack from the sniper's rifle. In a flash his mind made the connection: bullets travel faster than sound, "Duck!" he warned the gunners as he quickly pulled the surprised Quartermaster down onto the deck, then he reported, "Bridge, starboard lookout, we're getting shot at here!"

Several other similar calls came in and the Captain was deep-purple pissed. He turned to the phone talker and said with controlled fury, "You tell Mr. Pratt and the chief to return fire with the M2, then tell the port gunners to get over to the starboard side and man that other gun. I want those sons-of-bitches lit up!"

"Aye, sir!"

Chief Larson asked urgently, "Howell, where they comin' from?!"

Three more slugs smashed into the bulkhead. Howell peered over the top of the wing, pointed in the direction of their origin, and the fifty

began systematically chewing up the area while spewing empty shell casings everywhere. Chief McCoy fed an ammo belt into the thirty and he and Mr. Wells immediately joined the fray. Both heavy machine guns sprayed the jungle, red tracers guiding their aim.

As the small Junk Forces flotilla approached the beach, Howell saw the VC open up on them wounding and killing several of their sailors. The Yabuta swiftly retaliated with her Brownings, and in an instant the air was filled with a lethal fusillade of incoming and outgoing rounds.

The phone talker reported to the Captain, "All Battle Stations manned and ready, sir."

"Tell fire control to start laying down fires and I mean now. Use Mount fifty-one for AAC, and fifty-two for Willy Peter."

"Aye, Captain."

The Hawke's gun crews went to work and Death was unleashed upon the land.

DOC PHILLIPS HAD seven sailors in line who had been hit by flying debris. None were seriously wounded, and he was working quickly in hopes of returning them back to duty. He heard a commotion in the passageway, looked up from suturing a shoulder, and saw two Damage Control Men hauling a blood soaked unconscious sailor into the wardroom. "Put him on the table," he ordered. "Where did he come from?"

"You know, I ain't exactly sure. We was gettin' ready ta dog down the last aft door off the main passageway, when Slocum drug him in. He probably comes out a Mount fifty-two. Could be an ape or a gunner," and looking worriedly at his watch, he said, "We ain't done securin' the ship yet, Doc, can we take off?"

"Okay. Better get going then. You and you," he said pointing at two of the walking wounded, "Hold him right there. Make sure he doesn't fall off."

He told his current patient, "Don't go anywhere."

“Where the hell would I go, Doc, with this fishing line hanging outta my shoulder?”

Phillips changed gloves on his way over. It didn't take a brain surgeon to see it was a head injury. “You guys be ready. He may convulse. If he does, I want you to keep a loose hold on him. I don't want him to hurt himself.”

The doc began a quick primary assessment. The patient was breathing and had a pulse, always a good thing. He opened the shirt and palpated the abdomen, chest, and throat which looked and felt normal; no deformity or bruising. That being done, he determined the breathing rate was on the slow side of okay whereas the pulse was a tad bit fast, but not fast enough to worry about yet. Next, he gave Gretskey a hard pinch. The patient moaned but remained unconscious. Good, thought the doc, he's responsive to pain, but he's still out of it. Phillips began palpating the skull. It was a little early yet, but there was no bruising evident and no fluid draining from the ears. So far, so good. He could feel no depressions, no deformity....wait, what's this? He felt an odd lump on the upper forehead. It moved when he carefully wiggled it. It didn't appear to be part of the skull. Hmm, a foreign object? Wait a minute, it's a damn bullet!

With the help of his other patients, they cut off the gunner's dungarees, and Phillips began a quick but thorough secondary assessment on the rest of the body, examining it by eyeball and touch. Many a patient had died because a corpsman had fixated on a serious wound while missing others which were even more life threatening. That wasn't going to happen on his watch. When he finished with this important evaluative step, he went back to the head again and felt the lump. Yup, it's a bullet all right. He took a bottle of saline, opened up a sterile gauze pack and began washing the blood away.

When Gretskey's head and face were clean, Phillips gathered his thoughts for a moment. If it had been anybody but a deck ape or a gunner, he'd be dead by now. Everybody knew they had thick skulls with itty-bitty brains. Somehow the round had entered high up on the left side of his head, but

lacked the energy to penetrate the skull. Instead it plowed around between bone and skin, tunneling its way over to the right side of his forehead. As long as there was no serious brain injury, this was one lucky guy.

Good thing he's out of it, Phillips thought. He won't like this a bit. God alone knows what kind of organisms are in there. The doc knew he was going to have to cut it completely open starting at the entrance and follow the path to where the slug now lay at rest. Then irrigate the hell out of it, administer some IV antibiotics, and we'll see what we will see.

Phillips closed his eyes, made a quick prayer to the Healer of all healers, and told his helpers, "Hold him down good," and pointing to the largest of them said, "You grip his head like this, and don't let him move it. This might bring him back to consciousness, which isn't necessarily a bad thing, but he might come out of it with both fists swinging, so be ready for it." With that, he meticulously scrubbed the area with iodine, picked up a scalpel and began excising the wound.

PRIVATE PHAN LOOKED UP and saw a destroyer bearing down from seaward and the command junk and its acolytes approaching from the opposite direction. He was startled to hear shots coming from the jungle and knew they weren't from RPDs or AKs because they made a different sound. Before he could puzzle it out, Sergeant Trinh was behind him and the other men, shouting at them to open fire. Phan was scared to death, and his fear was making him weak. He had been rehearsing this in his mind for days now and knew that in order to do what must be done he needed to find a way to shut off his feverishly overloaded brain and just do it. Machine gun fire from the command junk was raking the beach.

Phan tugged on the RPD's bolt, feigning a malfunction. Trinh waved his pistol around screaming, "Fire, you cowardly piece of dog dung!"

Phan screamed back, "I can't, I can't, it's jammed!"

Trinh holstered his Makorov and said disgustedly, "Give it to me, you incompetent fool."

Phan surrendered his weapon.

The sergeant impatiently grabbed the machine gun, squatted down and began to pull back the bolt. Before he could discover the ruse, Phan hastily drew the long bladed, razor sharp dagger he had strapped to his leg and with absolutely no hesitation, for he knew that even the slightest hesitation would result in his own death, shoved it all the way into his sergeant's stomach. As much in surprise as pain, Trinh dropped the rifle and clutched feebly at the handle he now saw protruding from his belly. Groaning deeply, he hunched up, and fell over onto his side. Phan's grip was slippery from the hot blood and intestinal matter spurting from the wound so he got his other hand around the hilt and tugged the knife upward until it was stopped by the breastbone. Then he angled the blade's tip higher, slicing through the diaphragm, and as he brought the point straight into his nemesis' heart, he twisted it exactly the way Trinh had taught him to do.

The sergeant's body began to spasm; his extremities jerked weakly in the sand like a dog that dreams of running. Trinh had only enough life left in him to look into Phan's eyes in total horror before his lights went out. He just blinked out of this world and into the next, where his victims had been waiting for him with eager anticipation. Welcome to eternal hell Sergeant Trinh.

Phan cautiously looked around to see if he had been observed. Not a chance. Everything had erupted into chaos. Leaving behind his life with the Viet Cong, he climbed out of the trench and quietly slipped back into the village.

IN MOUNT FIFTY-TWO Palmer swiftly switched the men around to make up for the absence of Gretsky, and when the Captain turned them loose, Slocum encouraged his crew to stay focused and load faster. "Come on Martin, these projectiles need yer full attention. Git yer hand outta there, Ames, yer slowin' us down!" He was secretly pleased though. By his count they were pumping out a steady fourteen rounds a minute that were right on target. He thought to himself, these are fer Gretsky, yew VC scum.

THE JUNGLE AROUND the village suddenly exploded into bright orange flames as the Willy Peter and AAC began screaming in. The AAC shells fragmented on impact releasing thousands upon thousands of tiny pieces of metal which acted like miniature flying chain saws, whirring loudly as they flayed all in their path. Meanwhile, the White Phosphorous consumed with fire everything animate or inanimate it touched. The forest was simultaneously shredded and incinerated; rendered down to its atomic particles. The sound of the destruction was ear-splitting. The ground shook so hard from the blasts it knocked down the terrified villagers. It was more horrific, much more horrendous than any earthquake.

And the stench was overwhelming. It was as if the odors were emanating straight from a crack through the walls of hell: heavy smoke from the White Phosphorous, from the sulphur, and from the trees and green vegetation combusting as it was all being instantaneously ripped into wet resinous wood chips by the frag.

The detonations were so violent and so hot that the hooch closest to the forest ignited and sparks from it soon leaped to its neighbors. In no time at all, the entire village was alight.

APACHE RETREATED WHEN she realized her team could do no damage to the White Devil Ship. After the initial volleys it had closed down tighter than a fish's anus. On the bridge wings the gunners wore enormous gray helmets designed to cover bulky earphones. From a distance they looked like mushrooms. Through her spotter scope she could see four of the gray mushrooms operating a Browning thirty and fifty. The mushrooms were doing a very precise and methodical job of returning fire, and yet she ordered her troops to stay put, hoping they could hit at least one of the round eyed sailors. If they were so favored, the propaganda value would be immense. Besides, the Junk Forces had proven to be vulnerable and her teams had already made many kills.

Apache lived to fight another day, and she would slaughter many more Americans. After the war, she went on to train snipers and fight for Russia in

Communist revolutions around the globe. Her comrades here today weren't so fortunate. Those who were not gunned down by the Brownings, died in the fiery maelstrom.

SHOTS RANG OUT behind the village. VC sentries had been posted on the outer edges of the settlement and although they survived the Hawke's bombardment, their luck was running out fast. When the Junk Forces emerged from the jungle and came face to face with their enemies, they savagely attacked, relentlessly driving the Cong back toward the raging blaze as they ruthlessly killed every last one of them.

THE RESIDENTS OF DO NUOC had nowhere to go. They could neither move forward nor back. Behind them their homes burned with an uncontrollable fury. In front of them on the river were Junk Force sailors with bloodlust in their eyes looking to avenge their fallen brothers. Overseeing all was the Dragon Ship that breathed out fire. Everything was gone. The only thing they had left were the clothes on their backs. Most of the junks that hadn't put out to sea that morning had been badly riddled by machine gun fire.

Until now, there had been no love lost between the Viet Cong and those they had so cruelly subjugated. These villagers had paid their life's blood to their Communist masters. Their husbands murdered or enslaved, their sons and daughters forced into their ranks, and their women raped. As bad as that was, what had happened this morning was even worse, much worse. The Cong took most and left little, but the White Devils took everything and left nothing. Now they would willingly and whole heartedly support the VC.

The RPD machine guns had been no match for the Brownings, and the Viet Cong's deformed bodies littered the beach like so much flotsam left behind after a typhoon. As bad a master as the Communists had been, the villagers now mourned them. Their hatred for the Americans would now fester and grow like an untreatable disease.

OVER AT THE 416th Fighter Squadron's Headquarters in Phu Cat, Colonel Alvarez, the base CO, asked Lieutenant Armbruster, "Why don't you take a ride over to Do Nuoc and see if those Navy screwups need us to finish their mission for them. You better call in first. Once those clowns get going, they'll shoot down anything that moves."

"No problem, sir. I'm on my way."

Armbruster went over to his beloved Cessna 0-1 Bird Dog and did his pre-flight inspection. The Bird Dog was the smallest and slowest moving aircraft in Vietnam. It was a fixed wing, two-seater with a leisurely cruising speed of 104 miles an hour. Considering that the F-100s clipped right along at 860, Armbruster took an enormous amount of ribbing from his fellow Phu Cat pilots, who were always quick to remind him he flew a target, not a plane. They didn't bother him at all. He explained that he was really a local tour guide and invited them along for free sightseeing flights. So far no one had taken him up on his generous offer because they knew as a "spotter," he had one of the most dangerous jobs in Vietnam. Armbruster taxied off and settled into his usual altitude of about five-hundred feet, and carefully began to scrutinize the green canopy below.

Armbruster was particularly well suited for this line of work because he was driven by an insatiable curiosity, which is to say he was extremely nosy. His single engine was so small and silent the Cong rarely even knew he was in the neighborhood. When they did take the occasional potshot at him, he'd call in his big brothers with their jets and after they were finished, you can be sure those pesky Communists never bothered anyone else ever again. His job was to spot and report troop and materiel movement, then circle around overhead until the Huns showed up to blow everything on the ground to smithereens. Nothing much went by him. The other pilots hadn't nicknamed him "Bird Dog" just because of his plane.

He called the Hawke, identified himself, and requested permission to poke around a bit. It was a short jaunt from Phu Cat; a quick hop over a couple of mountains. A half-hour later the sapphire blue waters of the South

China Sea, and the ribbon that was the Song Vo, were in sight. Do Nuoc should be right there. He did a double take and whistled to himself. Where the hell was the village? My, my, my, those squids sure don't screw around. The area around the razed village reminded him of springtime back home in Nebraska. His dad's fields never looked so good. What are they gonna do next, plant soy beans and wheat? From low altitude it looked like it had been plowed and disc harrowed.

That was all interesting and would give him some stories to tell later at mess, but what he really needed to do was see if he could spot signs that the tunnel system had been wiped out. He was hoping to see some sort of depression suggesting a cave-in. His Intel put its location just upstream and a little ways up the mountain from the village. Although it had clearly been thoroughly shelled, he still saw nothing indicating it had been damaged in any way. That's the advantage of slave labor, he thought, they probably forced those villagers to dig it down a hundred feet, no skin off the Cong's noses.

As usual the squids had dropped the ball. Now it would be up to the Air Force to once again lead the way. He did a couple of barrel rolls, waggled his flaps, and flew off looking for trouble.

THE CAPTAIN ORDERED Mount fifty-two to secure their brass. They were clearly entering the cleanup phase of the operation. As a precaution he kept the forward mount and the bridge Brownings manned and ready. The gunners came out of the stench and filth of their turret into the bright sun and blue skies. The air felt cool to them even though it wasn't. The sunlight hurt their eyes and they were sweat stained and black-faced. Zack wasn't quite sure how many rounds they had fired, but his aching back told him it must have been well over seven hundred, and he wondered if Mount fifty-one had matched them.

There were empty powder cases laying haphazardly all over the entire fantail, and as the crew began stacking them, Zack heard people on the beach screaming in panic. He looked up and saw a line of Junk Force sailors

with bloody bayonets affixed to their M-14s walking through the smoking embers of what had once been the village of Do Nuoc. The survivors were running from them en-masse. They howled in blind terror as they raced toward the river heading straight for the remaining fishing junks; mothers carrying babies, daughters leading grandparents. It was primarily the very old, the very young, and women. Most of the able bodied men had put to sea, or if they were Cong, had jumped down their bolt-hole. The villagers' faces were stamped with hatred, horror, and loathing. Those that had the strength were attempting to launch their shot up junks in a desperate effort to escape. Zack would never forget how they looked. Never.

WORD WAS PASSED to lower the motor Whaleboat. The refugees had to be intercepted before they could flee. The powder cases would have to wait.

THE HAWKE'S boat crew and the Junk Force sailors had their work cut out for them. There was no doubt that VC were mixing in with the civilians. What had started as a trickle of junks had become a deluge, then a mass exodus. The Whaleboat had no sooner departed, when the Hawke was approached by the Yabuta which was loaded with the Junk Force's wounded. Doc Phillips had been notified and was ready and waiting for them as they were brought aboard.

GIANG CONCENTRATED on watching for junks with men between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five years old. Villagers on land were being asked for IDs. The herd was being culled into two groups: those with papers, and those without. Unfortunately, many had legitimately lost theirs in the fire, but that would become someone else's headache down the line. It took about an hour to corral the junks back to shore, and another to figure out which were likely Cong.

There had been much speculation amongst the apes about Giang's mysterious gym bag. Today its contents were revealed and put to good use.

It contained black hoods and handcuffs. The prisoners were handcuffed behind their backs, hooded, and forced to squat under the guns of their furious Junk Force captors, who would have liked nothing better than to kill them all right there.

Three “Tango boats” or armored troop carriers came steaming up the river. These were converted LCM-6 landing craft, each with room for about fifty people. They pulled up on the beach and lowered their bow ramps. The Cong were promptly manhandled into one, and the civilians loaded into the other two. They then raised their ramps and quickly departed.

The Vietnamese sailors began dragging the VC corpses over to the water’s edge and piling them up prior to loading them into the junks. The body count in Vietnam was of major importance requiring documentation and proof whenever possible. Then a loud voice called out from the trenches, and they all stopped what they were doing and hurried over. Sergeant Trinh’s remains had been discovered. After hauling him up they were puzzled to see he hadn’t been shot like the others, but had been gutted like a fish. Two days later while being interrogated with the other prisoners taken from Do Nuoc, Private Phan solved the mystery when he gave specific details of the killing and claimed the reward. The following week he was sworn into the Junk Forces.

The Commander shouted an order at one of his troops, who ran down to the Yabuta and retrieved a machete. He brought it back to the body, squatted down next to it and grunting with the effort, hacked off Trinh’s head. That finished, he picked it up by the hair, held it high, and proudly showed it around to the admiring crowd. There was much excited conversation and pointing. They couldn’t have been happier. The CO barked out some more instructions, and another of his men hustled off and fetched a wicker basket in which to put his bloodied prize.

AFTER GETTING THE boat in the water, the gun crew went back to policing their brass, but they witnessed everything that took place on the

beach of Do Nuoc. Zack was sickened by the whole thing, and it was all he could do not to puke when he saw Nguyen's butcher chop off that dead soldier's head and strut around with it, while his pals who looked like freshly fed vampires with their big dark red betel smiles, pointed and jabbered at it in what had to be the Vietnamese equivalent of high-fives and backslapping. He wondered if their boss was going to have it stuffed and mounted. Did he have a room full of similar trophies?

Just when he thought it couldn't get any worse, eight Huns came roaring over the mountain, and took turns dumping their cargoes of napalm. Rolling like burning waves rushing into shore, it flew across the ground scorching and torching everything before it as it unleashed the inferno of all infernos. And arising from this apocalyptic tableau was a massive pillar of greasy black smoke that soared straight up into the heavens, creating the illusion of ancient human sacrifice in a land seemingly forgotten by God.

Colonel Alvarez and Armbruster had been right. Once again the Air Force led the way and did what the Navy couldn't. Those Huns were like "The Little Engines That Could." Their loads of Napalm knocked out the tunnel's ventilation system. Sergeant Trinh had been wrong all along, for he and his burrows were cooked in every sense of the word. Even the fierce badger needed oxygen to survive. The Viet Cong came boiling out of the ground in droves trying to run to the river. None of them ever made it.

As soon as they emerged they immediately burst into flame. It was a surreal sight to behold. A building completely engulfed by fire has a brief window of time when it remains standing and becomes transparent except the charred framing timbers within are still starkly visible. And that's what happened with these Cong. Those who were topside on the Hawke could actually see their enemies' living skeletons silhouetted amid the bright blaze like macabre figures in a madman's nightmare. It was a rare viewing through Satan's personal fluoroscope.

They ran, they convulsed, and they were vaporized. Gone. All in the space of seconds. Welcome to hell on earth.

THE VILLAGE OF DO NUOC had been eradicated, and the inhabitants had been re-located. The Viet Cong there had been killed, captured, suffocated, or incinerated. Their glorious tunnel system had been converted into a mass grave. The Hawke had satisfactorily completed her assigned mission and returned to sea.



CHAPTER 15

THE HAWKE'S TOUR of duty in Vietnam was quickly coming to a close. Despite the apes' around-the-clock schedule, some of them still found the odd moment to study. After being Seamen Apprentices for six months, they were eligible to move up in rank to "Seaman First Class." At one-hundred-seventeen dollars and ninety cents per month, the increase in pay was a huge incentive.

Those approved by their superiors were given a written test which was based on deck seamanship and gunnery. The apes had been immersed in these subjects since reporting onboard, and it came as no surprise when Zack and Howell received high marks and sewed on their third stripes.

Zack signed up for the High School GED and without cracking a book, scored in the top percentile. This was hardly surprising either, considering Vermont prized academic excellence above all other virtues. The state had learned long ago that many of her sons and daughters would drop out before graduation to join the military, help in the homes, or work in the woods or on the farms. As a result, the educational system was designed to cram as much knowledge into their youngsters' heads in the shortest amount of

time possible. A Vermonter's high school diploma was often the equivalent of an Associate's Degree or better.

It was so simple he thought he'd try his luck at the College GED. The proctor met with the students on the mess decks to discuss study materials and scheduling. When the meeting ended Zack walked out with a signalman, Jameson, who said to him, "Man, everything on that exam scares the hell out of me except the math."

"Funny, I'm just the opposite. I've nevah been much good at equations and such. English was always my best subject."

They leaned over the lifeline, and fired up smokes.

"Tell you what," said Jameson, "We'd make a pretty good team. Why don't you take the language arts section, I'll do the rest of it, and we trade answer sheets?"

"What about the proctah?"

"Who, Judson? Don't worry about him. He don't give a damn. He'll probably sleep through the whole thing."

Zack thought it over, and in a moment of weakness agreed. "It goes against my bettah nachah, but okay," and he shook hands with the devil.

THEY TOOK IT, and when the results were posted, Zack and Jameson had passed everything except math.

"I thought you had it covahed," he said to Jameson at dinner.

"I hate to admit it, but even though your alphabet's missing its R, I guess you were better at English than I was at calculus."

They both laughed and went their separate ways.

Zack never forgot his one prime act of dishonesty or the outcome, and was never to repeat it again. He knew in his heart he deserved to flunk, and was actually glad he had.

THE HAWKE RETURNED to Qui Nhon prior to leaving for the states. Lieutenant Giang was to be put ashore, and would be greatly missed by

those who served with him on the bridge and in the motor Whaleboat. He had made many friends in the Deck Force and since he treated the apes with unfailing courtesy and respect they were always quick to do his bidding. From the Captain on down, all regarded him as an outstanding young officer. Slocum took up a collection and First Division gave a smiling Lieutenant Giang twenty cartons of unfiltered Camel cigarettes as a going away present.

WAY DOWN IN the engine room, Lieutenant Rollins was ecstatic. The deployment was coming to a close, and he and his Department had met every challenge, no matter how unreasonable the Captain's demands had been. All his snipes gathered around and listened intently as their boss told them, "You and your boys did a fine job, Bates. I still say the Captain doesn't know boilers from beans, but you all came through for the ship."

"Thank you, sir."

"I've been putting the statistics together for the cruise, and we made 907,000 gallons of drinking water and another 850,000 gallons for personal use. That means every crewman drank over 4,000 gallons of water, and used another 4,000 gallons each for showers, laundry, and cooked food. If the Captain had made the crew cut back their usage, we wouldn't have had all those problems running millions of gallons of muddy water through our evaporators. Believe me, I'm not blind. I saw how disgusted you all were when we kept adding ungodly amounts of cornstarch and boiler compound and then kept chill shocking those heating coils and STILL couldn't get that damned muck scale out of 'em. I know how many times you had to take our evaporators apart and clean those coils by hand. Even the chiefs have never come across anything like that crud before. I know what a pain in the ass it's been, but the important thing here is, we overcame and solved every problem we faced, and we met our quotas. I know it was a lot of extra work for everyone, and I appreciate it. You boys went the extra mile and should be real proud of yourselves."

All the snipes clapped and cheered!

COMMANDER NGUYEN was extremely appreciative of the help the Hawke provided in combating the Cong. In gratitude, he decided to induct the whole ship's crew into Junk Division 22, and he sent tailors over to measure everyone for berets. A week later in a formal ceremony held in Qui Nhon Harbor, the Junk Forces troops stood on shore at rigid attention, actually dressed in full uniforms, and the Hawke's crew manned the rails in tropical whites. After Commander Nguyen finished welcoming the Hawke into his outfit, the American and Vietnamese sailors, all wearing Junk Forces berets, crisply saluted one another. Division 22 would miss their big brother.

Then in company with the Black and Buchanan, the Hawke steamed eastward out of Vietnamese waters and began the long journey across the Pacific Ocean back to the United States.



CHAPTER 16

THE HAWKE AND COMPANY returned stateside by a different route. This time she stopped on the tiny island of Midway for the fuel and supplies necessary to complete her voyage home. The day came at last when she steamed over the horizon and the cityscape of San Diego was visible. The feeling of excitement onboard was palpable.

Since leaving Qui Nhon almost everyone put in for leave. Ten days prior to making landfall in California, Chief McCoy had informed his troops at Quarters: “Listen up, prit much ever’one a yew’s put in requests ta go home, and it cain’t happen. We still need ta have a crew onboard. So we’re gonta go by seniority. Slocum’ll make a list and post it in the compartment tomorrow. When yer name comes ta the top, put yer requests back in and then yew’ll git yer leave, but yew’ll not git it a minute before then.” When the list was posted Zack saw with a sinking heart it would be three months before it would be his turn.

The destroyer entered San Diego Harbor and the crowd on the pier was screaming, jumping up and down, and waving American Flags. The base’s brass band was on hand loudly playing Sousa’s Marches.

Ships returning from Vietnam received prime moorings and were never tied up alongside others. On the bridge, the Captain wasn't worried as he had been at their departure. This was a different crew. They had anchored countless times in Qui Nhon, Nha Trang, and Da Nang. He was alert, but there was no need to be concerned. Moretti put the ship alongside the pier with no more effort than if he had been a tournament fisherman parking a bass boat, and the apes had it tied up and the gangplank down in a trice. Then the fun began in earnest.

The liberty sections had been sorted out in Midway, and those without the duty had swiftly changed into their dress blue uniforms and were ready to leave. Another group was off the ship just as fast: those ready for discharge or being transferred to other commands. They had their seabags slung over their shoulders and orders in hand.

When they hit the pier, there was an almost comical search for loved ones, wives, and girlfriends. While the band blared on, there was much jostling and shouting from the sea of people on the overcrowded wharf, "John, John, I'm over here!" They were much like Emperor Penguins on a pebble strewn Antarctic beach frantically calling for their mates. When lovers were reunited there were many tears, but unlike the tears of sadness shed when the Hawke left, these were tears of pure joy. Many children would be conceived that day.

The Captain's wife didn't wait. She didn't hesitate. The crowd on the quarterdeck stood respectfully back for her as she made her way against the streaming tide of departing sailors and walked up the gangplank. She knew right where to find her husband, and strode quickly and purposefully up to the bridge. Captain Foley was bent over the chart table having a discussion with the XO, when much to the delight of all those present, and much to the Captain's own surprise, his wife appeared out of nowhere, ambled over, stood him up straight, and turned him around to face her. "Hello sailor," she said wrapping him up in a tight embrace that left nothing to the imagination. She locked a leg behind his, then took his face in both her hands and gave

him a long lingering, lustful, welcome home kiss. Captain Foley turned a delighted shade of crimson. He was back, and he was hers.

Those who witnessed this rare event wondered, could it be? Could it be that The Old Man is actually human after all?

An hour-and-a-half later the band had packed up and was gone. The ship resumed its normal activity, and everything was once again quiet. Those with the duty had been allowed on the wharf for an all too brief visit with their loved ones, and were back onboard. These sailors were more than happy and grateful to be back on American soil, but not unexpectedly, they were subdued and a little depressed all the same.

There had been no one there to greet Zack. Vermont was just too far away, and it was financially impossible for his folks or Tally to make the trip. He had taken the duty for a married ape and tried to keep busy until it was his turn to go on watch. He took a long, hot shower, for the ship had pier side water, sharpened his knife, folded and put away his laundry, and wrote a long letter to Tally. Bob Dylan's "Highway Sixty-One Revisited" played in the background on one of the apes' tape decks.

He was out on the dark moonless wharf at midnight in his dress blues and a heavy peacoat. Although it was still August, the desert's night temperature was bitterly cold, especially with the sharp biting winds that gusted hard and blew straight through his thick wool uniform, causing him to shiver.

Illuminated by the dim lights from the sleeping destroyer, the local rats were noisily chattering and quarreling amongst themselves; scurrying around on their little rat missions: skittering in and out of the dumpsters, tightrope walking up and down the mooring lines trying unsuccessfully to climb or jump over the rat guards with the fatter and clumsier ones amongst them often falling into the harbor. It was a regular circus. Another time and Zack would have found them amusing, but not tonight.

He was left alone with his thoughts of home. When those who have never been deprived of their families and loved ones think of being homesick, they can't truly comprehend the weight or meaning of the word.

Homesickness can be just as devastating as a physical illness. The more Zack thought of Vermont, his family, and Tally, the more his stomach hurt. It was as if he had eaten a bucket full of rusty nails. The thought of waiting three months to see them again was just as painful as a festering open wound or a mangled broken bone.

Zack had turned eighteen while in Vietnam, and with all he had seen, all he had participated in there, deep in his heart, he knew he would never heal, never fully recover unless he was reunited with those he loved, and those who loved him.

The watch supervisor found him retching over the side of the pier and was concerned. "Are you okay, Martin? You're white as a ghost."

"I'm all right, sir. It must be somethin' I ate."

"Well, if you're too sick, you let me know. I can always have you relieved."

"No need of that, sir. Just give me a minute."

Zack pulled himself together and finished his shift.

TWO DAYS LATER at Quarters, the chief made an announcement: "The cruiser Providence's goin' ta 'Nam fer an emergency deployment. They need her eight-inch guns there right bad, and they need 'em now. She's fillin' a crew and they need all kinds a personnel, includin' deck apes. Anyone who volunteers'll git three weeks leave."

"When does it start, Chief?"

"Jist as soon as them yeomen can cut yer orders."

Zack put in his request for transfer later that morning.

No one in the division was happy about it. Martin had never shirked a job or a duty, wasn't lazy and did everything he was asked, cheerfully and without hesitation. He was a fine gunner and helmsman. More importantly, he was dependable. If he was told to do something, he did it, and he did it well. No one needed to look over his shoulder or constantly check up on him. His bosses had been grooming him to become a Boatswain's Mate, but

comings and goings were an all too familiar part of Navy life, and although sorry to see him go, they reluctantly approved his request.

The following day, with his seabag packed, Zack said his good byes to Howell and the other apes. It was a bittersweet parting. They had been through so much together and had been forged into a tight little unit who fiercely had each other's backs. They had become brothers. As he crossed over the gangplank down to the pier he felt more than a little like a deserter.



PART TWO

THE CRUISER,
USS PROVIDENCE CAG 141

*O Christ! Whose voice the waters heard
And hushed their raging at Thy word,
Who walked'st on the foaming deep
And calm amidst its rage did sleep;
Oh, hear us when we cry to Thee,
For those in peril on the sea!*

—The U.S. Navy Hymn



CHAPTER 17

ZACK TOOK A BUS up to the Los Angeles airport and caught a late night flight to Boston. When he came through the gate he was met by Tally, Annie, and his parents: Holly and Tom Martin. They had driven down the day before in Tally's dad's behemoth 1963 Ford Galaxie station wagon. Everyone was jubilant, but subdued. These were Vermonters, after all, and they weren't comfortable showing a lot of emotion. The exception was Annie who was eleven and in fifth grade. She had missed her big brother terribly and was bouncing off the walls with an enormously huge grin, grabbing at his hands, talking about school, and anything else that came into her mind. There were hugs all around, and Tally and Zack were a little shy together, but when they glanced into each other's eyes, the spark was still there.

After picking up Zack's seabag, they all climbed into the car and settled in for the seven hour trip up to the Northeast Kingdom. The new interstate was under construction, so they drove through every town and village along the way. From time to time they switched out drivers and seating positions, sometimes they dozed, sometimes they chatted. Zack felt at peace. It was as

if he was in a little self-contained bubble with all the people he loved and cherished inside it with him.

As they traveled north, the population became sparser, and the land changed from hilly to mountainous. Everywhere he looked it was green; green fields studded with cows, mostly brown Jerseys or black and white Holsteins; green mountains broken up by brown and gray rocky faces, and there were trees everywhere all wearing their full plumage of summer greenery. The Martins had brought a big basket with sandwiches and apples as well as thermoses of coffee and milk. They stopped several times along the way, mostly by rivers or streams, to rest and eat. Zack wished the trip would never end.

When they finally reached the Martin's farm later that afternoon, they unloaded, and after a quick self-conscious hug, Tally got behind the wheel and left for home.

Although Zack had been gone only ten months, it felt like it had been ten years. The house and everything in it looked smaller than he remembered, and his parents looked much older. His sister had sprouted like a weed. Everything else looked the same: the rusty parts tractors and farm machinery lying around helter-skelter in the tall, purple-flowering burdock.

After unpacking, Zack and Annie went for a walk. The corn was coming in fine and high. The barn, the lifeblood of any farm, looked sturdy and in good repair. It was stuffed with hay, and Zack asked Annie, "I expect you helped with the hayin' this season?"

Annie proudly said, "Of couhse, Zack. Now that you'ah away, dad needs all the help he can get. He even let me drive the tractah to and fro the fields, and I'm big enough to push the bales off the wagon in front of the bahn now."

"You have grown, Little Sistah. Let me feel those muscles."

Annie grinned, lifted her arms in a Charles Atlas pose, and flexed her biceps. Zack gave each an admiring squeeze. They weren't large but were hard as iron. Like all the Martins, she was thin and wiry, but strong enough

to make herself useful even at a young age. She was a carbon copy of their mom. “Dad must feel right lucky to have you around to help.”

“Oh Zack, we all miss you so,” she said and impulsively hugged her brother. Zack felt a lump grow in his throat. After a moment he said, “I miss you too, Little Sis, I miss you all, mo’ than you can evah know.”

They walked down the steep hay field to the rocky creek that flowed below it. Over the years Zack had caught countless brook trout out of its crystal clear waters. He told his sister, “When I was in high school, all I wanted to do was get out of heah. I made up my mind I was gonna see the wohld. Well, I’ve seen a bit of it now, and it’s not what I reckoned t’would be. I always knew we was pooah, but I found out we’ah richah than the richest man in any of the countries I’ve been to. I thought I might move away aftah I got out of the Navy, but I’ll be back heah so quick youah head’ll spin, an I’ll nevah leave again. It’s good to get out and see how othahs live, but it just makes me value Vamont all the mo’.”

Annie squeezed his hand. It had been one of her worst fears that Zack would never come home, but now she knew he would.

They returned to the farmhouse where their mother had been busy preparing a big homecoming meal.

“I expect they haven’t been feedin’ you as they should,” she said as they walked into the dining room. The table was laid out with a large venison tenderloin, and a baked lake trout which had to have weighed fifteen pounds. “Did you catch it, Dad?”

“No, son, Amos Jenkins did, but he knows how much you like fresh fish, and sent it ovah when he heahd you was comin’ home.”

There were also new potatoes, fresh baked bread right out of the wood stove, and garden peas. They sat at the table and joined hands. Zack’s father said Grace, “Heavenly Fathah, thank you fo’ bringin’ us all togethah again and keepin’ Zack safe. Thank you fo’ Thy bounty. Please bless us, oh Lord, and these Thy gifts, amen.”

The food was passed around and they ate until they were stuffed. Zack couldn't get enough of it. He had forgotten how good his mom's cooking was. Just when he thought he couldn't take another bite, his mother went into the pantry and came out with a large apple pie and homemade ice cream.

After the meal, Zack and his father went out to the rocking chairs on the porch to smoke. The night was cool and crisp. The sky was dark, the moon wasn't up yet, but the bright stars in the Milky Way were dancing. The crickets were chirping, and the hooting of an owl could be heard by the barn. These were the only sounds of the evening except for the low conversation between Annie and her mom, and the clinking of dishes in the sink as they were being washed and dried.

Settling into their seats the men lit up cigarettes and Zack's dad said, "I know you well enough to see somethin's happened with you ovah theyah. They had an ahticle in the papah on 'Operation Mahket Time.' They didn't say much, but I know the Hawke was in it. I ain't gonna pry, but if you want to talk about it, I'll listen. Tally come out heah a coupla weeks ago, and she's worried about you. Said you was writtin' her regulah, and then youah lettahs just stopped tellin' her anythin'. Whethah you talk to me or not, don't make no difference, but you gotta talk to her, son. You gotta tell her all of it. She loves you and wants to spend her life with you. You could do a lot wohse, but if you clam up, you'll drive a wedge between the two a you, and you'll drive her away."

They smoked a bit and Zack thought it over, and said, "Dad, I just don't know how to talk about it. It's like if I do, it's gonna happen all ovah again. Vamont is a place wheah people treat each othah right. Neighbahs help neighbahs. Look at the fish Mistah Jenkins sent ovah. That would nevah happen in Vietnam. That fish'd be eaten on the spot by whoevah caught it, ovah by whoevah could take it fum him. Anyone knew he had it, they'd be on him like dogs on a bone. Theyah just ain't no rules. It's like God ain't theyah."

His dad said, "Son, that's what wah is. We all kill. We kill to eat, but we do it quick and kind. We make it painless as we can. The Good Book

tells us not to kill ouah fellow man; all that goes out the window in a wah. Theyah ain't no rules on it. You kill youah enemy any way you can. Long owah slow, with a bullet owah flame, makes no difference. It's just a job that needs doin'. Theyah ain't nothin' you done owah seen that I haven't. I was a medic in Italy, and mostly helped wounded soljahs, but fum time to time I had to do some killin' to do my job. Just the way it is, son, but you can't hold it inside owah it'll eat you up."

"Thanks, Dad, I'll think on it."

"Theyah's another thing I want you to think on, son. Do you know Mistah Hendrickson down in Stannard? Do you remembah his fahm?"

"I do, Dad."

"He has about a hunded-and-fifty acres, mostly good bottom land in a valley and he grazes his cows on the hills. Runs about fohty-five Holsteins. Been talkin' with him at the Grange. He's gettin' old. Been kicked once too many times and is thinkin' of sellin' out lock, stock, and barrel. Wants to move to Flowida, if you can believe that. Place would be perfect fo' you and Tally...."

"Wait, Dad...."

"Heah me out, son. Me and youah mom don't make a lot of money, but we don't spend much eithah. We can give the Hendrickson's a decent amount of cash and pay off the rest at five-pacent intrest. We'll hold it fo' you 'til you get out. We seen too many of ouah young folks pack up and leave the state. At this rate, nobody'll be heah in anohtah fifty yeahs. You could make a good livin' on that fahm. Shhh, don't say nothin' yet, just think on it. Theyah's no hurry, just think on it."

When they went in, Zack called Tally on the phone, but they couldn't really talk much unless they were willing to have everyone on their party line listen in on their conversation and blab it all over the Northeast Kingdom. They would see each other tomorrow night at the big "Welcome Home Zack Potluck Party" at the Grange.

THE NEXT MORNING the Martin family got up before dawn, ate a quick breakfast of coffee, eggs, and bread, and then headed over to the barn. Tom had three surge milking machines, and with Zack's help, they quickly worked their way through the fifty-head herd. Annie was still too small to lend a hand with that. They were too heavy for her to move, but she had already learned how to disassemble and clean them after they were used.

When finished, they trooped back to the house for more coffee and to plan the rest of their day. Zack and his dad decided to head out to the woodlot. They loaded the wagon with chainsaws, wedges, a cant hook, bar oil, and gasoline then hitched it to the tractor and rode off. Annie and her mom began cooking for the potluck.

THE SUN WAS streaking through the trees, leaving half the thick woods in dark shadow, and the rest bathed in bright light. It was cool, but warming rapidly as the day progressed causing a thin haze to rise from the undergrowth. Bugs could be seen racing through the lighted portions but disappeared when they flew into the shade. The cicadas buzzed loudly.

Zack filled the saw, set the choke, and pulled the cord twice and the big Homelite roared to life. The pungent blue smoke of the two-stroke oil smelled good and made him smile. He revved it a couple of times to make sure the chain was oiling, and set to work. He cut a notch two-thirds into the base of a tree in the direction he wanted it to go, went to the other side and made a second cut from the opposite direction toward the notch, stood back and watched it fall. He had forgotten how much he loved this: the way the saw gripped the tree as if it had a mind of its own, the smell of the woodchips rapidly thrown from the chain, the quickness of the cut, the satisfaction of dropping the tree where he wanted it.

At noon, they filled the wagon with firewood and tools, and returned home for lunch. The family took the afternoon off, taking naps, then got up, milked again, and got ready to leave. They put on their Sunday finest,

while Zack wore his dress blues, loaded the car, and drove over to the Grange in Shelby.

BACK AT THE Goodwin house, Tally caught the tail end of an argument her parents were having. She heard her dad say, "...backward hill people..." they both turned towards her in embarrassment when they realized they had been overheard. Tally flushed red as her blood pressure spiked, and said to her father, "I know you don't like Zack or his family, but it doesn't have anything to do with you, Daddy. It's my choice and my life. I'm over eighteen and I love Zack, and if he'll have me, I'll marry him."

"Come on, Tally," he thought his daughter couldn't have been more beautiful at this moment and it broke his heart, "You're just infatuated. You can do much better than an ignorant hill farmer."

There were tears of anger in her mother's eyes when she rounded on her husband, "We all come from ignorant hill farmers! This country was settled by ignorant hill farmers including the revered ancestors you're so very proud of! If you'd ever take the time to talk to Zack, you'd realize he's every bit as smart as you are, he just hasn't had the benefit of your education!"

There were tears in Tally's eyes too, as she said, "That's right, Daddy, he scored in the top percentile in his Navy GCT test, and he passed his high school equivalency with flying colors. He even passed the college GED in everything but math!"

Goodwin knew he was on dangerous ground. It was time to retreat. He said, "All right, all right, I know I can't stop you, but all I ask is for you to take your time. Wait until he gets out of the Navy and I'll give you both my blessing. I'll walk you down the aisle and give you away myself."

He was wise enough to know all he could do was play for time, and pray that his wife and daughter would come to their senses.

Both women were momentarily mollified, and Tally relented. "Okay, Daddy. But don't you ruin his homecoming party, and you be nice to the Martins. All of them!"

THE PARKING LOT was full of farm trucks and cars ranging from the bulbous round bubble shapes of the late forties through the space-agey designs of the early sixties with their rocket ship type fins and enormous chrome grills. The newest of them was the Goodwin's blue Ford Galaxie station wagon which looked like it had been designed by NASA to fly to the moon. Zack's heart lurched: Tally was already here.

The Martins hustled out of the car and brought their contributions inside. The hall had been set up with tables against the wall for the food dishes, and tables with chairs in the center of the room for the meal. A large handmade banner festooned with red letters proclaimed, "WELCOME HOME ZACK!" While the rest of America was having trouble with Anti-War Protesters, that wasn't the case in Vermont. The people here didn't have time for such foolishness.

The women were wearing cotton floral print dresses, sewed at home from patterns and fabric mail ordered from "Monkey Ward," which is what the Montgomery Ward catalog was called at the time; some of the dresses were worn as simple "A-Lines," others were belted at the waist with full skirts. The men wore the suits they had bought in which to get married. The older gentlemen's were double-breasted, wide lapelled, blue serge shiny in places from wear. These suits would be worn on formal occasions and to church on Sundays throughout their lives. The last time they would wear them would be at their own funerals.

The men's body sizes didn't change all that much during their allotted span on earth. They lived lives of intensive physical labor, and should their suits need a seam let out or a tuck, every household had a treadle Singer sewing machine and their women were expert seamstresses routinely taught how to sew in their early girlhoods.

As the Martins entered the hall, everyone turned to them and began to clap and cheer. The crowd was large, but Zack saw them all in black and white whereas Tally stood out in bold sparkling color. His eyes only saw her.

The crowd gathered around him. "Welcome home, Zack."

“How long ah you home fo’?”

“When do you have to go back?”

“You look good, boy!”

There were so many people, with so many questions, all happy to see him and wishing him well.

The Goodwins pressed to the front. Tally’s dad gave him a stern handshake, “Welcome home, Zack,” he said through pursed lips. Mrs. Goodwin, however, gave him a warm hug and an even warmer smile.

Soon the folks went back to doing what they were doing: the women bustling about getting the food in order, and the men jawing about important topics, such as the pros and cons of Jersey cows with higher butterfat content versus Holsteins with higher milk production.

When all was ready the women summoned everyone to eat. As the guest of honor, Zack, much to his embarrassment, was thrust to the head of the line. There was far more game on the tables here than at a typical community wild game supper. Had any police officers been present, the entire party would have been arrested on the spot, loaded into buses, and trundled off to jail. There was venison, bear, moose, and partridge. They were served as grilled and boiled meats, and in thick wonderful stews. There was bass and a remarkable array of various species of trout along with creamy pike chowder. There were garden fresh salads and wide assortments of homegrown vegetables. There was a mountain of loaves of fresh baked bread, rolls, and scones with tubs of freshly churned Jersey butter, honey, and maple syrup. There was a long table devoted exclusively to desserts: pies, strudels, cakes, cobblers, and cookies. The smell was heavenly.

Zack could hardly stand it. He and Tally both wanted to run off and be alone. The Martins sat and ate with the Goodwins. The conversation was stilted as it is when people without much in common are forced into each other’s worlds. Mr. Goodwin thought the Martins were peasants, and the Martins, though they liked Tally and her mom, thought Mr. Goodwin was a pompous snob.

After everyone had eaten their fill and more, the women got busy cleaning up. Plates were scraped, washed, and dried. Pots, pans, and dishes were repatriated with their owners and returned to the vehicles. The men seeing what was afoot quickly went outside to smoke and continue their discussion on important topics, such as live bait versus flies for trout, green chop versus silage for milk production, and stalking versus still hunting for deer.

When they were once again summoned, the men went to work folding up the tables and chairs, and putting them away. Four of the crowd went over to a small raised platform and set up a microphone, and then they reverently unpacked instruments that, like their music, had been handed down through many generations: a guitar, fiddle, a hammered dulcimer, and a mandolin. They tuned up, and began to play and sing the music of Vermont: a combination of bluegrass and the hauntingly beautiful ballads and reels of the Green Mountains.

Zack went over to Tally and led her out onto the crowded dance floor. There wasn't much chance to talk, but just their bodies touching was conversation enough for both of them. With Tally in his arms, Zack felt more at peace than he had since witnessing all that took place at the village of Do Nuoc.

Alcohol was strictly forbidden in the Grange Hall, but from time to time the men would step out to their cars where there were flasks and bottles aplenty. As the evening turned into night the party became livelier, the discussions more animated.

There were two farmers with adjoining lands in attendance who had been feuding over a property line for years. One had accused the other of moving a stone wall which separated their farms, a not unknown practice in New England. Unfortunately, both found themselves in the parking lot simultaneously while going for another surreptitious drink that neither needed. "Theyah you ah you lyin' thief!"

"Who you callin' a lyin' thief? That wall's been in the same place fo' ovah two hunded yeahs!" He shoved his accuser hard in the chest. This act of

aggression was answered with a wild swing to the side of the accused thief's head. Then they both started throwing punches. They were separated by smiling men who were not strangers to this kind of behavior. After all, what kind of party would it be without at least one fist-fight?

When it was time to go and good byes were said, Tally and Zack hugged, and quickly made plans to go swimming at Lake Willoughby the following day.

THE NEXT MORNING as Zack and his dad were leaving for the barn, his mom said, "Stay heah a minute, Zack, theyah is somethin' I need to talk to you about." When they were alone she continued, "Zack, when Tom come home aftah the wah, he was a mess. Wouldn't say nothin' about it. Said evahthin' was fine. One day we was stopped on the highway at an inasection when a big semi without much of a mufflah on it went by. Youah fathah jumped out, come ovah to my side, pulled me out, thew me down in a ditch and covahed me with his body. I was scahed out a my wits. I told him, 'We can't go on like this. I need to know what you been thew, you have to tell me. You ain't protectin' me. I can take it,' and by gorry, he did. By the time he got done, I almost wisht he hadn't, but he needed to get it off his chest befo' the healin' could begin.

"A woman can take mo' than you think, Zack, and we see things men don't, things they miss. What she can't take is not knowin' what's goin' on with her man. I know somethin' happened to you ovah theyah. Tally sees it too. She loves you and wants to marry you, so you talk to her and help her undahstand."

"Okay, Mom."

She gave her son a big hug and a big smile, kissed his cheek, then said, "Now go on and help youah fathah in the bahn."

TALLY PICKED HIM up at eight in her mother's 'sixty-one white Ford Falcon. Zack stowed the picnic basket his mom had packed for them on the

back seat and got in. Now that they were finally by themselves, they were quiet. They both had things they wanted and needed to say to each other, but they knew they had the entire day to do it.

Their destination, Lake Willoughby, is one of the Northeast Kingdom's best kept secrets. It's a jewel of a lake which was formed when a glacier cut a half mile wide strip out of the center of a large mountain. Left behind were sheer twenty-seven-hundred foot granite cliffs on both sides that went straight down into the crystal green waters of the three-hundred-and-fifty foot deep lake. Zack knew it well. He had fished it through the ice in winter and from a canoe in the other three seasons. In it trout grew to legendary proportions. It was a picture postcard lake in a picture postcard state.

The glacier had played other tricks on the surrounding landscapes. It had carved out many other odd shaped mountains, one of which resembled a perfectly formed shark fin. The young couple traveled in a comfortable and companionable silence. Tally drove down the dirt road to the south end of the lake, parked, and they gathered their swimming suits, a blanket and the picnic basket. By silent, mutual consent, they carried them across the short beach, and into the thick birch woods. They carefully maneuvered their way through the green leafy white-barked trees and the huge irregularly shaped granite boulders which were strewn everywhere as if by giants at play. When they came to the southwest corner of the lake, Tally spread the blanket. Here they were surrounded by woods and rocks while the lake with its incredible plunging blue-gray and brown cliffs lay at their feet. Overhead the cloudless sky was the bluest of royal blues. There was a slight wind blowing from the north, just enough to cool down the ninety-degree day.

They went into the woods to change, and then entered the clear frigid water, which took their breath away, as did the sight of each other in bathing suits. When they could take no more of the cold, they came out and sat in the sun on their blanket.

Tally leaned towards him and said, “You know, Zack, about the time your ship stopped working with all those aircraft carriers, your letters got pretty vague, and after that, I never really understood what you were doing anymore. I also can’t help but notice you’re different now. I don’t mean it in a bad way, but you’re quieter, more mature. I love you and I want to have a life with you. I want us to marry and have a family. Do you want that, too?”

“Mo’ than anythin’, Tally.”

“Then you need to talk to me about what happened over there.”

“I don’t know how, Tally. I’ve done evahthin’ I could to bury it away.”

“Come on Zack, we need to do this if we are to be together. You have to open up and let me in.”

And so he did. Haltingly at first he began telling her of the mutilations, the shootings, the napalm, all of it. Then he added: “The Viet Cong ah cold-blooded savages, Tally, make no mistake about that, but the people in the south ah the same as us. They only want to live quiet lives and take cayah of theyah families. They don’t have much of anythin’ to begin with and then in an instant, theyah whole village is up in flames and what little they did have is gone. They ahn’t even fightin’ and yet they seem to be the ones payin’ the highest cost.”

“Oh, Zack,” she hugged him and cried. They lay down. Their first kiss was electric, the second was lightning. All of their love, the anguish of their long separation, their longings, their tears, and fears came together in one giant blinding flash, like a thunderbolt, and they suddenly knew who they were. They were of one flesh, of one spirit. They would weather any storm.

Afterward, while they lay in each other’s arms, Tally said, “Zack, I haven’t told you yet, I was saving it as a surprise, but I’ve been accepted into the nursing program at Lyndon State University. By the time, you get out, I’ll be an RN. It’s a tough program, but it’ll give me something worthwhile to do while you’re away. You don’t have to worry about me; there will never be anyone else for me but you.”

Zack replied, “The same goes fo’ me, Tally. I want to marry you, but that’s goin’ to have to wait ‘til I come home fo’ good. Theyah will nevah be anyone else fo’ me but you, eithah.” They came together again, and now, because of the commitment they had just made, it was even better than before.

They dozed a bit and when they awakened Zack told her about the Hendrickson farm. Tally was ecstatic. “That’d be wonderful, Zack! Stannard isn’t far from St. Johnsbury. When I finish nursing school, I can probably find work there. Can we go see it?”

“I don’t see why not. We can do it now if you like, it’s not fah.”

“Oh, yes, let’s go.”

They got dressed, picked up the blanket and basket, and walked back to the car.

FOUR MILES OUTSIDE the small village of Stannard, the tree shaded two-track road went up a steep hill alongside a fast flowing rocky brook. They then drove into a lush green valley where everything leveled out for a half-mile or so. At meadow’s end another mountain rose sharply, and the same spring fed brook could be seen cascading down its heavily forested face. When the water reached the bottom, it slowed and wandered through the flats, forming many small oxbows along the way.

The valley’s sides were open pastures filled with hardwoods toward their tops. Black and white Holsteins were lazily grazing on both hills. Zack noticed that the lowlands looked fertile and were used for hay and corn. In the center of it all stood the Hendrickson’s homestead, a white eighteen-thirty’s Cape Cod style house. An addition with two dormers had been added on over the years, most likely by some long ago owner whose family had outgrown the original dwelling.

Across the narrow lane was a good-sized red barn in fine shape. There was no silo, but silage was being stored on the ground in a bunker. There was a newish looking John Deere tractor outside with all the various implements needed to run a farm.

TALLY PARKED, they got out, walked up between the two maples flanking the pathway, and knocked on the front door. It was answered by a woman Vermonters would have described as “large boned.”

She looked them over and said, “It’s Zack Mahtin, isn’t it? Back fum Vietnam, ain’t ya?”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Zack, “And this is my intended, Tally Goodwin.”

Tally flushed with pleasure, for it was the first time he had called her that, and she took his hand in hers.

“Well, come in, come in. You just set ya selves down in the kitchen. I’ll run ovah to the bahn and fetch the mistah, won’t be but a minute.”

Soon the two came in. Zack stood up, said hello, and introduced Tally. Mr. Hendrickson was a tall, thin, older man, a bit stooped with a pronounced limp where one of his “girls” had kicked him. He sat down at the table while the missus got out coffee cups and put a pot to perk on the wood cook stove.

“I talked to youah dad about sellin’ the place. You bein’ heah, I assume you’ah intrested.”

“Ayup, we be.”

“That’s good. I don’t want to sell out to some fancy flatlandah who’d break it up and piece it off. I put a lot of sweat into it, and the next fella should be able to do fine, too. It gets a bit boggy in mud season, but the soil’s good, and there be plentya maples. I know how you Mahtins like ta make youah syrup. It’d be a snap to set up a sugah house.”

Zack nodded, and Mr. Hendrickson continued, “We bought a place ouside of Olando, Flowida. Paid cash. Don’t owe nothin’ on it. Fixin to go down theyah in a yeah o’ two. Gettin’ too old to be chasin’ the cows, and the cold weathah cripples me up some. All we want outta this old place is enough to get by, and it don’t cost much to live down south.”

The missus poured coffee, set out cookies, and sat down.

“We want fifteen-thousand fo’ the land and house, and anothaten fo’ the cattle and equipment. I’ve got two a everythin’: two tractahs, two

spreadahs, two plows, two discs, two choppahs; you name it. Plus, I've got some othah stuff behind the bahn fo' pahts. Whoeverah comes in behind me is all set to go to wohk and ship milk.

"We want five-thousand down, and we'll give ya a note fo' the balance at five-pacent. Don't cayah if ya pay it quick owah pay it slow, just as long as ya pay on time. I've known youah dad all his life, and his wohd is good enough fo' me.

"Now I'm gonna set right heah and finish my coffee, why don't you two go have a look."

"Thank you, sir, we will, and we'll see you befo' we leave."

They went outside, checked out the barn and gave the property a quick once over.

"It's perfect, Zack. We could be so happy here."

"It is, Tally, and I'm gonna make shuah it becomes ouahs someday. You and I ah goin' to live heah," and he took her in his arms and they sealed it with a kiss.

Hand-in-hand they returned to the house and said their good byes. Zack told the Hendricksons, "I expect my dad will be talkin' to you."

The mister said, "I hope so, Zack, we'd love to see you and your pretty little missus take it ovah."

ON THE DRIVE BACK Tally said, "I know your folks aren't rich. I think I can get my dad to help."

"You've got to be kiddin' me. He can't stand the sight a me."

"Be patient with him, Zack. He'll come around. Besides my mother loves you like a son, and just so you know and won't worry, she got me the pill. I've been on it for the last two months waiting for you to come home, and when you leave, I'll stop. That should show you what she thinks of you!"

Smiling, Zack reached over and squeezed her shoulder. "I had no idea, Tally. Maybe theyah is hope that ouah families can come togethah."

THEY PULLED UP in front of the Martin house, made plans for the next day, ardently kissed and reluctantly parted. Zack walked into the kitchen and found his parents having a cup of coffee. He told them he and Tally had a long talk and worked things out. Not only that, he asked her to marry him after his discharge, and she agreed. They were jubilant. He then told them of their visit to the Hendrickson farm in Stannard.

His father asked, "Well, what do you and Tally think of the place?"

"It's a piece of paradise, Dad. She likes it as much as I do. Tally's goin' to nursin' school in the fall, and wants to get a job in St. Johnsbury when she's done. She also thinks her dad might help us buy it."

Tom's temper flared, "I wouldn't ask that man fo' a penny!"

"It's okay, Dad. Tally says he'll come around, and her mom likes me well enough." But he didn't mention how he knew.

"We'll see. I'll go down to Stannard tomorrow, and ask Mr. Hendickson if he can hold off 'til you get out of the Navy. I know you and Tally can make a good go of it there."

WHEN TALLY GOT home she sat down with her mom on the porch and explained that Zack had asked her to marry him when he finished his enlistment. Her mother was greatly pleased. She knew it was inevitable. There was no more use in trying to prevent this than trying to stop the sun from rising. She would finally have the son she had always prayed for. On the other hand her husband might not be so happy about it, but she'd make him see the light. She had her own little ways. When Tally told her of the farm, she lit right up. "What a terrific price! We can help with that."

"Oh, could you Mom? The Martins don't have a lot of money, but they're ready to do it themselves if they have to." Then a troubled look crossed her face, "But what about Daddy?"

"Don't you worry, Tally," her mom reassured her, "leave him to me. Zack's going to be family now and you can be sure things are going to change around here real quick."

LATER IN THE EVENING Zack called Tally on the party line and they talked about getting married, and that's how the whole Northeast Kingdom knew all about it the next morning.

IT SEEMED TO THEM BOTH that his leave was over in an instant. After going to Lake Willoughby they had been inseparable. They had grown closer than ever before, and were excited about their future together. Tally knew Zack would never be happy unless he was farming, and she being accepted into the nursing program was a dream come true. Since she was a little girl that's all she ever wanted to do.

When it was time for Zack to return to San Diego, Tally defiantly asked both parents at breakfast, "Zack has to go back the day after tomorrow. Can I take him down to Boston, and stay over?"

Her dad started to say something, but her mom shot him a steely-eyed look that shut him right up. He sighed and said, "Ask your mother," and left the room.

Tally's mom said, "Of course, dear. Take the Falcon, and don't forget your pills."

WHILE WAITING for Tally, Zack picked a bouquet of purple and white phlox from his mother's perennial garden. He was wearing dress blues and his seabag was packed and on the porch. When she came driving up the two-track he opened the screen door and announced, "She's heah." His family hustled out. When Tally got out of the car, Zack handed her the flowers and her throat tightened up and her eyes misted. Zack loaded his seabag into the trunk, and turned to say good bye to his family. His dad gave him a fierce hug and said, "You take cayah a you'self, son." His mom was next, though her's was a lot gentler. She told him, "You come back quick as you can, Zack. Don't evah fo'get this is youah home and we love you." Annie was softly crying. Zack bent down, took both her hands in his, and said, "Cheer

up, Little Sis, I'll be home again befo' you know it, and I'll write you." Then he gave her a soft squeeze, straightened up, and walked with Tally to the car.

Zack looked back, and knew he would never forget this moment for as long as he lived. His dad, in bib overalls and a white tee shirt, had a muscular arm around his mom, her graying, blond hair worn up in a bun. She was wearing a dark floral print dress and a white apron. Both her hands rested lightly on Annie's shoulders. Annie, in summer shorts and a lavender blouse, was trying her best to smile for him. His dad waved with his free hand. Zack waved back, climbed in the car, and Tally drove back down the two-track.

TALLY HAD LAID the bouquet on the back seat and said, "Thanks for the beautiful flowers, Zack. Is it okay if I bring them home first? They'll get ruined on the trip."

"Shuah thing, Tally," and she drove over to Bridway.

WHEN THEY PULLED into the driveway, Tally's father was push-mowing the grass. Tally faced Zack, put her hand on his arm and said, "I'll only be a minute," and hurried into the house with her floral prize.

Zack got out of the car and approached Tally's hitherto now unapproachable dad. "Hello, Mr. Goodwin," who stopped mowing. A slight frown crossed his face. It was quickly replaced by a look of weary resignation, "Hello, Zack."

Zack wasn't quite sure how to do what must surely be done, so he went at it directly, "Mistah Goodwin, I want to marry youah daughtah after I get out of the Navy. We love each othah, and you'll nevah have to worry. I'll take cayah of her and treat her right."

Tally's father rocked back for a few seconds realizing the futility of raising any objections, and said, "You have my blessings, Zack." He reached out and shook Zack's hand. At that moment Tally came out and knew something momentous was happening. Her father asked her, "Do you love this man?"

“Oh, Daddy, of course I do, I love him with all my heart!”

“Then I give you both my blessings to be married.”

“Thank you, Daddy, thank you!” and she gave him a warm embrace.

“Thank you, Mistah Goodwin,” who was silently praying Zack wouldn’t hug him, too.

“That’s okay, son. Now you both had better get going, you have a plane to catch. Be careful on the roads.”

“Yes, Daddy, we will,” Tally said with her heart so full she thought it would burst.

THE DOG DAYS of August in New England often provide the finest weather, and this was no exception. The sky was blue with a few puffy cumulus clouds floating around. The day was hot, in the low ninety’s, and they drove with all the windows down. They switched drivers as they had on the way up and listened to various radio stations as the old ones faded out and new ones came in range. They listened to the Rolling Stones who couldn’t “Get no satisfaction,” the Loving Spoonfull who believed “In magic in a young girl’s heart,” the Beach Boys who needed help from “Rhonda,” and Sonny and Cher who “Got you babe.” Many of the songs were older, but they were still new to Zack because of his tour in Vietnam. As Tally flicked the radio dial, she heard a few notes and zeroed in on Jackie DeShannon singing “What the world needs now,” and began singing along in her fine contralto voice, much honed by her church’s choirmaster:

“What the world needs now is love sweet love
It’s the only thing that there’s just too little of
What the world needs now is love, sweet love
No, not just for some but for everyone.

Lord, we don’t need another mountain
There are mountains and hillsides enough to climb

There are oceans and rivers enough to cross
Enough to last until the end of time.

Lord, we don't need another meadow
There are corn fields and wheat fields enough to grow
There are sunbeams and moonbeams enough to shine
Oh, listen Lord, if you want to know

What the world needs now is love, sweet love
It's the only thing that there's just too little of...."

ZACK WAS STUNNED. The combination of the lyrics, and Tally's wonderful voice, took his breath away. When he regained his powers of speech, he told her, "That was the most beautiful song I've ever heard."

"Yes 'tis. It's more of a hymn than a song, and it's oh so very true. If there was only more love, you wouldn't have to go back to Vietnam. I just don't know what's wrong with this world, Zack."

"Tally, would you sing it again?"

She smiled, reached over, turned off the radio, and sang it as a pure and lovely a capella.

It gave Zack goose bumps and he said, "All I can hope for is that the Lord heard you singing just now and He'll answer our prayers."

Tally looked startled and swerved the car a little.

"Tally, what's wrong?"

"Zack, you're saying your R's!"

He chuckled, "You noticed?"

"How could I not? You'd bettah explain, Mistah Man!"

"You wouldn't believe how much guff I've taken for the way I talk, Tally, and I made up my mind I'm not going to let anyone use my accent to make fun of me on the Providence. I'm not blind either. I see the way your father winces every time I open my mouth. I'll tell you what though, until

I tried doing it, I didn't know how hard it'd be. When I talk now, I have to concentrate on every single word I'm saying."

"Why Zack Martin, if I wasn't driving, I'd hug you to pieces right here!"

"Pull over, Tally," and she did. They found a secluded spot by a rocky, fern lined brook, and enjoyed themselves and the warm sunny day.

THE RIDE WAS over much too quickly to suit either of them. They stopped at a small mom-and-pop motor court about five miles from the airport. Zack went in and asked for a room for he and his "wife." The stern looking gray-haired matron took his money with a knowing smirk, and handed over the key. Tally parked out front and they brought in their bags. After unpacking, they held hands and walked over to a diner a short distance away. It felt good to stretch their legs after the long drive.

They ate supper, ambled back to their room, Zack with his arm around her shoulders, Tally with her arm around his waist. They were a little shy with one another. Most of their time together had been outdoors. They each used the bathroom, took showers, turned out the lights and went to bed. They climbed under the covers, found each other, and their shyness vanished.

They made love, drifted off, awoke with one touching the other, one thing leading to another, and drowsed again afterwards. They repeated this cycle several times throughout the night.

In the wee early morning hours, Tally was awakened by Zack thrashing around, still fast asleep, shouting, "No, no, don't do it!"

"Wake up, Zack," she said trying to shake him awake, "What's wrong? Come on, wake up!"

He sat up. "It's those damn nightmares again."

"What nightmares, Zack?"

He told her and said, "It's the fust time since I've been home. It's pobably cuz I know I'm soon headed back ovah theyah."

She wrapped him in her arms and said, "Oh, Zack, I love you so much. Chase those ugly dreams right out of your head!"

“I love you, too, Tally, mo’ than life itself. I’ll try.”

She thought her heart would break and she held him tight, for she didn’t know what else to do. They soon both fell into a more relaxed slumber

THEY SLEPT UNTIL seven in the morning, packed up, loaded the Falcon, and got on the road. Settling into the car, they both had the same thought: “I will be brave. I will not let her/him see my pain. I will leave him/her with happy memories.” The traffic was thick, unlike their journey through Northern New England where they had traveled sometimes for hours without seeing another vehicle.

Tally pulled into the American Airlines parking lot. She thought Zack looked quite handsome in his dress blues. He threw his heavy seabag over his shoulder and put his other arm around her slim waist as they walked into the airport. He checked in, got rid of his bag, and was given a boarding pass. They found the gate and stood holding hands. Neither talked much, both afraid if they did tears might start. When his flight was called, they embraced, wishing their time together had not ended so soon.

The stewardess looked upon the young lovers with compassion and sympathy. She smiled to herself. So young, she thought, so much in love. She too was no stranger to separation and heartache. Her own baby brother was in the military serving in Vietnam and she never stopped worrying about him. She put off boarding as long as she could, but the Captain finally poked his head out of the plane, waved to get her attention, then pointed at his watch in exasperation.

“Come on you two,” she told them in a soft, kindly voice, “only passengers are allowed through that door. It’s time to go.”

Tally and Zack kissed passionately, and finally disentangled themselves. Tally put her hands over Zack’s heart, looked up at him and said, “I love you, Zack.”

Gently taking both her shoulders in his hands, he looked straight down into her eyes and once again said, “I love you more than life itself, Tally,”

and he meant it with his whole heart, with his soul. She looked right back and knew it was true. He drew her to him for an all too brief hug. He kissed her lightly on the forehead, and dropped his hands to his sides, then stepped back, never taking his gaze from hers. They both smiled at each other as best they could, but there was nothing they could do to hide their pain. Zack turned and walked out onto the tarmac, climbed the boarding ramp stairs like a condemned prisoner ascending the scaffold. Reaching the top, he looked back and waved to her.

WHEN ZACK ENTERED the plane the stewardess said to him, “We have a couple of extra seats in first class. Why don’t you stay up here where you’ll be more comfortable?”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

She led him back three rows, pointed, and said, “You take that window seat,” knowing he’d be able to see his girl from there. Next to him in the aisle was an elegant young blond woman who could easily have passed for Tally’s older sister. Zack didn’t know much about sophistication and wealth, but he instinctively knew she was someone special. He asked her, “Is it okay if I sit here, ma’am?”

“Please don’t call me ma’am. My name is Sharon, and of course it’s okay,” she said with a smile that immediately put him at ease.

“I’m Zack. Pleased to meet you.”

“Pleased to meet you too, Zack,” and she moved out of his way. Zack sat down, and searched the terminal’s windows for a last look at his sweetheart. The object of his affections had not escaped Sharon’s attention, very little did. She was every bit as smart and intuitive as she was beautiful.

She had noticed them both in the waiting room, and thought, this could turn out to be an interesting trip after all.

IN THE TERMINAL Tally searched the plane’s windows for a last look at her sweetheart. When they saw each other it was electric. In that moment

they both knew they were connected by an invisible cord that could never be broken. They knew it would bind them together through time, through distance, through any hardship great or small. They waved to each other one last time, and the plane rolled away, and then took off.

Tally found a chair, sat, and quietly cried her heart out. She had no idea when she would see Zack again, no idea at all, but she would be waiting. She would be strong. She would always be there for him. She would be his rock.



CHAPTER 18

THE PLANE TAXIED down the runway gaining speed and gathering momentum. The passengers were thrust back in their seats as it leaped into the sky. Zack watched the airport, then Boston grow smaller and smaller until they were lost to sight. Sharon looked over and saw he was struggling with his emotions, and was moved.

She asked, "Are you coming off leave?"

He nodded yes.

Sharon thought he was embarrassed by how he felt. She reached over softly touching his forearm and said, "Listen, I saw you and your girl in the terminal. Don't be ashamed of how you feel. Love is a rare thing. Look around, the whole world's gone crazy: war in Vietnam, the cities are burning from race riots, our leaders are being assassinated. We live in a time of hate, so love is special. It's a gift. It's the most precious gift of all."

Zack shook his head, "That's not it, Sharon. I'm just sad because I don't have any idea how long it'll be 'til we're together again."

She thought a moment and then said with a sympathetic look, "I'm sorry, Zack, I got the wrong impression. But, I do know how badly it hurts to be

kept apart from those we love. I was an 'Army brat,' and I learned that lesson at an early age. My family moved every couple of years, and I went to six different schools growing up. It seemed like I no sooner made friends when my father'd get new orders, and we'd have to pack up and go. Forget about boyfriends, each and every time we moved, I left a piece of my heart behind. I'll bet I felt a little like you're feeling right now... do you love her very much?"

"I do. I want to spend the rest of my life with her."

"Then pay attention. Pretend I'm your older sister and let me give you some advice. Love must be nurtured like a living thing. It's going to be very difficult to keep it alive with you being away so much. You need to write her as often as you can, call her while you're still stateside, send her gifts and little things. I'll let you in on a secret, we girls love that. She'll treasure them, and they'll remind her of you. Don't ever let her forget you, not for a day, not for a minute. Words are cheap. You must constantly show her that you love her, that you miss her."

Zack smiled, and said, "Thanks, Big Sister, I will."

They chatted a while. Sharon noticed the way his R's came and went. There was an unusual accent underlying his speech. A different cadence. She thought it almost sounded British.

"Where are you from, Zack?"

"Vamont," he replied.

Bingo, she thought.

"I've never been there, what's it like?"

They passed the time as he talked about his state, his girlfriend, and his home and family.

Sharon said, "You know, Zack, Tally's very beautiful, she'd do well in modeling."

"I don't think she'd like it. She's goin' to nursin' school this fall. Is that what you do?"

She was modest about her accomplishments. "I've done a little of it, mainly clothing lines and TV commercials. I've even had several bit parts

in some movies. I'm auditioning for a few bigger roles next week, but Hollywood's not my favorite place. The people there are full of themselves. The bigwigs are stuffed shirts who expect you to fall at their feet and worship them, but if you want a job in the film industry, that's where you have to go. You just have to make the best of it."

"You don't make it sound like much fun."

"It isn't, Zack, but in spite of some of the more negative aspects of the business, it's really creative work that can be very rewarding."

She was uncomfortable talking about herself. She directed the conversation back to him. Showing once again her knowledge of the military, she said, "You're wearing the Armed Forces Expeditionary Ribbon. Did you serve in Vietnam?"

Zack nodded yes, "And I'll be goin' back as soon as my ship is ready."

"Zack, if you don't mind, I'd like to hear anything you have to say about what's really going on over there."

He sat back and considered her question. Aside from Tally, he'd never discussed it with anyone else, and it unleashed a torrent of memories. Memories he'd rather not have had.

He looked into her eyes, and saw she was genuinely interested, so he answered her as sincerely as he could:

"We don't make much of a fuss about it, Sharon, but the men in my family have fought in every war since the Revolution. I'm just the latest link in the chain. Every single one of us was brought up to do our duty, and no matter what I think, that's what I'm doin'. I've seen some awful things in that place, things that never should have happened, and I know first hand that the Communists need to be pushed back across the border. Without us, the killing'll never end. In spite of all that, I still feel bad about what's happening to the civilians. On a good day they have a tough time of it, and I can't help thinkin' instead of makin' life better for them, both sides are makin' it worse. My destroyer operated in some pretty remote areas, and the farmers and fishermen we saw didn't seem to mind who ruled them so

long as they were left alone. They ain't a whole lot different than folks in Vermont. We don't care what they do in Washington either. We're too busy runnin' our farms and businesses to pay much attention to it. I don't know what the answer is, Sharon. Somehow there's got to be a way to settle this, maybe come to some kind of agreement so's the ordinary folks'll be left in peace. I know it's foolish, but I keep wonderin' what it would be like fo' my dad if he was going out to do the milkin', and someone lobbed a five-inch round of White Phosphorous into his barn."

"No, Zack. That's not foolish at all. Thank you for being so open with me and sharing that."

She thought, this Tally is one lucky girl. I hope she knows how very lucky she is. He's young, but he thinks for himself, and yet his sense of duty overrides his own opinion. If all New Englanders are like him, there is still hope for this country. Zack is a gem, a little rough around the edges, sure, but time would take care of that.

The plane landed in Los Angeles, and they walked down the ramp together into the terminal. Amongst the crowd was a liveried chauffeur, holding up a large sign with the name "Sharon Tate" printed on it. She faced Zack, and said, "There's my ride, now you take my advice about Tally, don't let her forget you for a second. Show her you love her. You be careful and stay as safe as you can, sailor."

"I'll try Big Sis, you take care, too."

"Got to go, Little Brother. Keep watching the movies and maybe you'll see me sometime."

"I know I will, you're headed for the top." He went to shake her hand, but she stepped into him and impulsively wrapped him in a big affectionate hug while kissing him on the cheek. With a little wave, and a big smile she was gone.

On the way to the baggage claim area, Zack passed a small shop selling books, magazines, souvenirs, and T-shirts. In the window was a small red plastic shark with "Welcome to L.A.!" printed on its side. It caught his eye.

With Sharon's advice still ringing in his ears, he ducked in, splurged all of sixty-seven cents, and bought it for Tally. Next, he examined his options for the trip down to San Diego. Since he didn't have to check in until the following morning and being an ever frugal New England Yankee, he elected to save his money and travel by thumb. He stopped at the ticket counter and asked the young woman there for directions. Working in an airport had made her a quick study. "Are you hitchhiking?" She asked.

"Yep."

"I thought so. Okay. Go out the front doors and go right. It'll be about a quarter of a mile to Highway 105 East, which'll be a left. Take it all the way to the end, about fifteen miles or so. It dead ends right into 605. Take that north for a couple of miles and it'll intersect the Golden State Freeway, or the I-5. That part's not going to be easy. Lots of cars and lots of traffic, but after you get on it, it'll be clear sailing right on through. Here, let me write it down for you." She did and handed him the directions. He thanked her, and she gave him a surprisingly crisp salute, which he returned, and they both laughed.

ZACK LUGGED his seabag down to 105, settled in on the highway's entrance, and stuck out his thumb. It was hotter than Hades, and if it wasn't for the heavy layer of smog it would have been a beautiful day. The cars sped by. A half-hour later a newish, red Plymouth Fury pulled over, Zack grabbed his seabag, and as he hustled over he noticed a bumper sticker on the back: "America. Love it or leave it!" The driver was in his early forties. "Where you going?"

"San Diego, sir."

"Throw your bag on the back seat and get in. I can get you to the I-5, but I'm going north.

While letting Zack out he said, "You're doing a great job for God and country, son. We should have kicked Russia's ass after World War Two, but our leaders didn't have the guts to do it, and now the Communists're

spreading their Godless ways all over the world. They've all got to be wiped out, wiped off the face of the Earth."

"Yes, sir. Thanks for the ride." Zack wasn't troubled so much by the man's opinion as he was by the strident way he expressed it. He could tell the driver would not listen to, or tolerate any other view but his own. This was Zack's first indication of how deeply the country had been divided by the Vietnam War, and it certainly would not be his last.

THE I-5 CLOVERLEAF was a nightmare. The south bound on-ramp couldn't be accessed from where he had been left off. Once again the old Vermont aphorism proved right, he thought: "You can't get there from here." Zack walked a ways, tossed his seabag over the guard rail, then climbed over the edge, and dropped ten-feet down to the garbage covered ground. He walked along a side street until he came to what he thought was a small mom-and-pop grocery store, it wasn't. It was a bodega. He was in one of L.A.'s many Mexican barrios.

Zack went inside and saw herbs and strings of dried peppers hanging from the ceiling. He was uncertain as to what they were, or where he was, but now knew it wasn't a general store. The place smelled of exotic spices and other strange foods that had never before seen the light of day in Vermont. He asked for directions. The proprietor shrugged, and let off a fast stream of words in what Zack assumed was Spanish. Am I in the United States of America, he thought, or am I in "The Twilight Zone?" After stopping four more people on the street he finally found a heavily accented English speaker who sent him off in the right direction.

The tiny brownish-orange sun that was trying to burn its way through the thick dirty fog was relentlessly hot and oppressive. He was sweaty and bone-weary when he finally plopped his seabag down on the side of the Freeway. It felt like it weighed a ton. Zack got to work and stuck out his thumb.

Hitching in Vermont was always difficult because of its small population and lack of cars. Los Angeles was just the opposite. Tens-of-thousands of cars

whizzed by him at alarming speeds carelessly weaving in and out of their lanes as if they were being driven by a pack of escaping lunatics. They battled and jockeyed each other for even the slightest advantage while displaying an astonishing indifference for the lives and safety of others.

As he watched, a Plymouth Valiant doing forty-five miles an hour pulled out a few feet in front of a pickup flying along at about seventy-five causing the truck to jam on its brakes and swerve wildly. Vehicles alongside him began moving into the other crowded lanes, as those behind stomped their brake pedals to the floor. Scorched tires shrieked and smoked. It was like ripples in a pond with surrounding cars trying to spread out from the center. The truck slowed and steadied, gave a long blast of its horn, and the speed demon's arm shot out of the window with his middle finger extended. Zack had seen this gesture so many times by now, he was beginning to wonder if it wasn't some kind of L.A. greeting.

The Valiant's driver traveled on serenely oblivious to the fact that his act of idiotic irresponsibility could easily have resulted in many fatalities, or that now in a childish act of retaliation, the pickup was riding inches off his rear bumper with his hand pressed permanently on the horn. It reminded Zack of a crazy Demolition Derby, where in spite of everyone's best efforts to smash into each other, the cars somehow managed not to collide.

Most who drove by ignored Zack's presence, but many of those who didn't, flipped him the bird. After an hour he felt like the invisible man. He disgustedly contemplated digging the "Welcome to L.A.!" shark out of his seabag and throwing it down the embankment. And after the second eternal hour of standing in the same spot, breathing the thousands of passing automobile's exhaust fumes and L.A.'s habitually poisonous air, he was dizzy, and wondered where the closest bus station might be.

SUDDENLY a Highway Patrol vehicle with flashing lights pulled over. Zack's stomach, already sick from the pollution, lurched as the voice over a

loud speaker bellowed, “Come on, sailor, get your ass over here and throw that damn seabag in the back. Come on, mosh skosh, I don’t want the next hundred morons rear-ending me while I’m waiting for you to wake up!”

Zack’s heart leaped. He quickly did as instructed, then jumped in. The cop looked like he’d seen it all, but was grinning. Looking at his heavily lined face, Zack knew this was undoubtedly a rare event.

“What are you, nuts? I seen you an hour ago, but couldn’t get over without explaining a sixty car pileup to my shift supervisor. Figured you’d be gone by now. You’re in a rotten place. I’ll get you outta this mess.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Ahh, don’t ‘sir’ me. I was in the Navy, too. A Gunner’s Mate on the Rowan. Us squids gotta stick together. Look, my patrol area ends about twenty miles south of here, and that’s where I’m taking you. I’m going to put you in a nice, safe place so you won’t get run over on my turf. You wouldn’t believe the paperwork I’d have to do if that happened.”

By the time they reached his southern boundary, traffic had thinned considerably. While climbing out, Zack thanked the trooper, who said, “No big deal. Glad to help someone who’s not afraid to stand up and fight for our country. I’m sick of these long-haired commie pukes, burning their draft cards and hauling ass to Canada. Now you be careful on my road,” and he sped off.

His next series of hitches were from folks who loved their country and were pro-war. All were short, and the intervals between them were long. The number of single-fingered salutes he received far exceeded rides. His reception here was certainly much different than it had been in Vermont.

AFTER SUNDOWN, Zack found himself stranded on a dark and deserted entrance ramp. At this rate, he thought, I’ll probably be AWOL for a week before I check in. Off in the distance he could see the bright lights of a Jack-in-the-Box fast food restaurant and a filling station. Not many cars went by. Not many at all.

A couple of hours later someone finally stopped. When he approached the driver's open window, he heard laughter coming from within. Before he could say anything, the front passenger leaned over and threw something at him. In stunned disbelief, it took Zack about half a second to realize that his dress blue uniform was now covered with a vanilla milkshake. He heard more laughter as the car roared off.

Zack was mad. Not angry. Not pissed. No, he was MAD! Mad like a bull that has been lanced by a picador. Mad like a bull that has seen the flash of a red cape in the ring, and like that bull, he just wanted to sink his sharp horns into flesh: to maim, mutilate, rip, and rend. His exhaustion instantly evaporated.

While growing up he had spent every early spring with his dad picking rocks out of the cornfields prior to plowing. They made a game of it, throwing the smaller ones at various makeshift targets off in the woods. It was a friendly competition, but as he grew older, Zack often won. He developed a strong arm, and he had accuracy. What he didn't have right now was a rational mind. His body was running on sheer, unadulterated rage, fueled by copious amounts of adrenaline.

Zack blindly charged after the car, thoughtlessly scooping up a soft ball sized rock from the side of the road while he ran, and with every ounce of his chemically enhanced strength, he flung that rock at his absconding antagonists, and it flew straight and true. The rock's velocity was much faster than that of the fleeing vehicle, and it lodged nicely in the rear window's safety glass, shattering it into a thousand pieces. Only the plastic lamination kept it from disintegrating. The car swerved, slowed, and then peeled out. Had they decided to stop and fight, no matter how many there were, Zack would have beaten them to a bloody pulp, Highway Patrol paperwork be damned!

ZACK WAS A MESS. He took out his handkerchief, wiped himself off as best he could, picked up his seabag, and stalked over to the filling station. He used their rest room to clean himself up, but it was too late. Without

taking off his wool uniform and soaking it in the sink, there wasn't much he could do. He asked the attendant if a bus came through to San Diego.

"You're in luck. It comes off the freeway and stops right here, but the next one isn't due for another hour."

"Thanks."

He sat out front on his seabag and waited. If he ever did this again, he thought, it would be in civilian clothes, never again in uniform.

THE BUS TRIP was not what he had hoped for. It stopped at every poor excuse for a town along the way. Even worse, somewhere in the middle of nowhere it stopped yet again for what seemed like at least the hundredth time, opened its doors, and two Border Patrol officers climbed aboard. They closely inspected everyone's identity papers, looking for illegals. Zack, who was by now in an extremely foul mood asked belligerently when it was his turn, "Do I look or sound Mexican to you?"

"Sorry about that. I know you're a red, white, and blue American, but we gotta check everybody. Just doing my job."

Zack glowered, and reluctantly forked over his Military ID card.

The spot check ate up another damn hour.

TEN HOURS AFTER leaving the airport, in what was normally a two-hour trip, Zack finally arrived in San Diego. He ruefully thought to himself, sure saved a lot of money hitchhiking didn't I? He caught a cab to the base, and asked the guard where the USS Providence CAG 141 was docked. A sticky, smelly, and thoroughly exhausted Zack walked out on the wharf and took a good look at his new home.



CHAPTER 19

ZACK WAS COMPLETELY overwhelmed by the size of the ship. Of course he'd seen plenty of cruisers from a distance, even refueled from this one long ago, but nothing had prepared him for the imposing physical presence and aura of power that this slumbering giant projected as she lay quietly at rest. And it seemed to him that there were guns everywhere. In addition to the two huge triple eight-inch diameter mounts positioned on the forecastle and the forward 01 deck, he noticed half a dozen three and five-inch turrets located along the side. Just forward of the fantail on the 01 and 02 decks sat a pair of monstrous twin terrier missile launchers. Zack thought the Providence had more weapons than a porcupine had quills.

There were two quarterdecks set up: the first on the forecastle, the second on the fantail. He could see blue uniforms using the one aft. The other must be for officers, he correctly assumed, so he walked down to the enlisted gangplank, set his seabag down, and opened it. His blood pressure rose when he saw the "Welcome to L.A.!" shark and he briefly thought about heaving it off the pier. If he never saw L.A. again it would be too

soon. Instead he tightened his jaw, because as per Sharon's instructions, it was a gift for Tally, so he moved it aside, fished around and found the manila envelope containing his Service Records. He took out his orders, closed the bag, swung it over his shoulder, and started up the gangplank. When he reached the ship he stopped and saluted the OOD, "Request permission to come aboard, sir."

"Permission granted."

He stepped onto the Providence, set his seabag out of the way, and handed the lieutenant his orders.

The officer took a good hard look at Zack's filthy and disheveled appearance. His eyes bugged out and he shouted, "What in hell happened to you? You're a disgrace to the uniform, sailor!"

"I'm really not sure, sir," and it all came out in a rush. He told him and the Petty Officer of the Watch about his miserable trip down to San Diego. When he got to the part about the milkshake, the petty officer, a stocky signalman, bristled and said, "I'd like to get my hands on those pukes. I'd break their backs!"

When Zack finished, the OOD, whose name tag identified him as Lt. Lowenstein, took a quick look at his orders, and said, "You've just come back from Vietnam, so you don't know what's going on here anymore. Things have changed quite a bit since you left."

The POW interjected, "Actually, they've gone to hell, sir."

"You're too right about that, Jenkins." He turned back to Zack and said, "You're lucky those anti-war clowns didn't run you over. If you had flown into San Francisco, you'd of seen just how out of control they really are. Up there they hang out in front of the terminal with 'Baby Killer' signs, yelling and screaming at everyone in uniform. They'll even spit on you if they think they can get away with it."

Zack remembered back to his Welcome Home Party at the Grange, and couldn't believe it. This wasn't how he was raised. This wasn't America anymore. In his world American folks respected the Flag and those who

fought for it. They understood that the military put their lives on the line every single day and respected the sacrifices service members made for them, both large and small.

The POW said, “Any of those maggots spit in my face, they’d be eating through a straw.”

The OOD replied, “If you got caught, you’d go to jail. My advice to you, Martin, is rent a locker in town. Get some civilian clothes and keep ‘em there. Don’t wear your uniform unless you have to, especially if you’re traveling outside of San Diego. You’ll be less of a target.”

“Thank you, sir. I just don’t understand it. How could everything change so quick? It’s never been like this before.”

The POW answered, “I don’t know. We don’t make the decisions. Even the Skipper doesn’t make ‘em. We all just do what we’re told, go where we’re told, and fight who we’re told. If those jerks really want to stop the war, they should go to Washington and stick their signs up all the Congressmen and Senators’ asses. They’re the ones calling the shots. And while they’re at it, they can shove one up President Johnson’s, too. Hell, he’s the ‘Baby Killer in Chief.’ Taking it out on us ain’t gonna change doodly-squat.”

“That’s enough, Jenkins,” the OOD said with a smile. “Go find someone from Second Division to check him in.”

“Aye, sir,” he turned and went.

“Second Division? Sir, I’m a First Division sailor.”

“You’ll find things are a little different here from your last command. We’ve got a crew of eleven-hundred, plus we’re almost twice as long as your destroyer. We have four deck divisions. First Division takes care of the Forecastle. Second and Third take care of the sides, and Fourth’s turf is the fantail.”

Jenkins returned with a tall square seaman built like a cinderblock. The first thing Zack noticed about him was an ugly scar running straight across his forehead disappearing on both sides into the blond hair on his temples. It looked like it had been stitched by Dr. Frankenstein. It gave him a rakish

look, and he exuded an easy confidence. He grinned affably at the OOD and said, “Hey, Mr. Lowenstein, How you doin’?”

Lowenstein looked amused, “Tolerably well, Holmann, how about yourself?”

“As well as an unfortunate and lowly deck ape can possibly be, sir.”

The OOD chuckled and said, “Good luck, Martin, and don’t listen to anything he says.”

Holmann looked Zack over, and said, “Dude, you look wiped out, let me grab that for you.” He effortlessly threw the seabag over his shoulder and led Zack off. As they walked forward on the port side, Holmann said, “Come on now, we’ve got to make this quick. I was winning big time, so El Jefe sent me to fetch you, just to get me out of the game.”

“El Jefe?” inquired Zack, thinking, this guy doesn’t speak English.

“Spanish for the Big Kahuna, your new boss, First Class Boatswain’s Mate David Kohen. You have trouble understanding da English? You a little slow?”

“No mo’ than you.”

Hmm, thought Holmann, never heard that accent before. Must come from a different planet. No wonder the poor sod doesn’t understand the old native tongue. His inquisitive mind filed it away for future investigation.

Amidships, Holmann ducked through a watertight door, and climbed down a ladder to a compartment so full of cigarette smoke that someone without a sense of smell would have thought the ship was on fire. Zack could hear the raucous voices of many squids all talking, groaning, and cheering loudly, excitedly.

Squinting through the thick blue haze, Zack saw a wide table packed with deck apes of all colors and sizes engaged in a lively card game. In the center was an enormous jackpot. Others crowded around watching or waiting for someone to vacate a chair so they could take a turn.

His escort marched over to a player sitting behind a large pile of plunder consisting of currency and coinage and a bundle of watches tangled up in

other pieces of jewelry. With the click of his heels and a mock formal salute, Holmann announced, “El Jefe, I present to you your new fish, Martin. Be patient with him. He talks a little funny and doesn’t fully understand our language.”

“Okay, Professor.”

Holmann reclaimed his seat, reached into his pocket, pulled out a thick wad of bills saying, “Deal me back in and fork over your money. You know I’m gonna get it all anyway!”

The Big Kahuna finished out the hand, raked in the pot, stood up and surprised Zack. He was like no other Boatswain’s Mate he had ever met. Most were hard-nosed country boys. This one had straight glossy black hair that fell in a bang over his forehead, just like Moe’s in the Three Stooges. His soft belly hung a bit over his belt. He wore thick, black-framed glasses, and looked exactly like Sgt. Bilko, a popular television character on a 1950’s sitcom played by Phil Silvers.

Holmann caught Zack’s look of surprise and winked at him with a big grin.

“You boys take a break ‘til I get back.” And glancing at his spoils said, “Don’t even think about it. I know exactly how much is there, and if any’s missing, I’ll sell you all to the snipes. Hmm...not a bad idea, maybe I’ll sell you to the snipes anyway.” The group laughed and cheered.

Beckoning to Zack, he said, “Bring your Service Records and come with me.”

On the way out of the compartment, he pointed at an empty middle rack, “That’s yours.”

They climbed back up the ladder and Zack was grateful for the fresh air. El Jefe found a bollard, and said, “Sit.”

Zack sat, and in the dim light from the ship and pier, Kohen rifled through his records. Then with a thoughtful look said, “You’re coming off the Hawke, right?”

“Ayup.”

“Ayup? Now I know why that ignorant surfer thinks you don’t speak de English. You’re from Vamont!”

Zack didn’t say a word. Aw hell, he thought, they’re going to make fun of me here just like they did on the Hawke.

Kohen saw him tighten up and said, “No, no, that’s a good thing.” He knew he had struck gold. No one worked harder, or were more honest than those who came from the furthest reaches of the northeast. “I’m almost a Vermonter myself.”

“How do you figyah?”

“I come from Plattsburg, New York, which, if you don’t know, sits right on the western shore of Lake Champlain, directly across from Burlington. Do you come from a farm family?”

“Yes, I do.”

Better yet. Farm kids learned to work hard at an early age.

He rifled through the records again with a frown; maybe he had a screwup on his hands. Commands often gave rosy evaluations when they wanted to dump somebody. “Why did you leave your last duty station?”

“For the leave. Anyone who volunteered for the Providence got three weeks immediate leave.”

Kohen was reassured. Destroyer apes here were held in high regard. They were trained in all facets of their trade. Boatswain’s Mates on a cruiser were more specialized.

“Are you a qualified helmsman?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Okay, I might have a slot for you. Second, Third, and Forth Divisions each send a man to the bridge for Messenger of the Watch and the helm. Half-hour as messenger, half-hour on the helm, and then back again. Think you can handle it?”

Zack was a little intimidated by the size of the cruiser, but really wanted the job so he kept a straight face and said with more confidence than he felt,

“I’ve been standing bridge watches since I got out of boot camp, Boats. It shouldn’t be a problem.”

“All right, you’ve got it for now. I’ll see how you do. What was your GQ position?”

“Sight setter in a five-inch mount, same as you have here.”

Pointing, Kohen said, “We man that one there. Our sight setter is getting short and won’t be coming with us. You’ll have to talk to the Mount Captain though. He has final say. We also man the aft-bow spring-line and the forward-quarter spring-line while mooring to piers, so that’s where you’ll be on the Special Sea Detail. By the way, you look like shit. What happened to you?”

Once again Zack told the tale. When he finished, El Jefe asked, “Did you get any pay-back?”

Zack replied slowly in a voice tinged with fatigue, “You know, Boats, I can hardly believe I did it, but I was so damned pissed off, I chased that car and threw a rock through their back window.”

“Good! That takes a load off my mind. It’s all about pay-back. In this division, hell, in the whole damn Navy, someone messes with you, you hit them back harder. I’m glad you took care of it or me and the boys’d have to go up there and burn that town down to the ground.”

Zack thought, no matter what size or shape or nationality, Kohen proves that Boatswain’s Mates are all the same. It’s like Slocum said back in Olongapo, they were Boatswain’s Mates only because the Navy had no rating for bad-asses.

“One last thing, Martin: I run this division. The Deck Officer and the Chief are useless as tits on a bull. They leave me alone because they know I always get the job done. If you have any trouble with anyone or anything, you come to me, and I’ll get it squared away. You go over my head, I’ll make your life a living hell, and trust me, I know how. Do we have an understanding here, Vermont boy?”

Zack nodded affirmatively, “I have no problems with that, Boats.”

“Now, come on down and hit your rack. You look dead on your feet.”

As they reached the compartment, the apes cheered. Kohen's money was gone. He told them, "You ass wipes better put it all right back on the table now, or I'll have Vermont boy here kick your asses!"

The apes cheered again and the rowdy card game recommenced. In spite of the noise, Zack slept like a baby.

THE NEXT DAY at reveille Zack got up, took a long hot shower and put on a fresh set of dungarees. Holmann was waiting for him.

"Come on, Martin, I'll show you where the mess decks are."

They filled their trays, sat and started to eat. Zack was curious, and asked, "How come they call you the professah?"

"It's not a big deal. I graduated with a degree in Business Administration from U.C. Santa Barbara, but my real major was surfing."

"Why aren't you an officer?"

"That's easy. An officer signs up for six years, enlisted men only serve four. There's no way in hell I was going to do two extra years. Besides, my dad's got a lot of bucks, and as long as he thinks I'm towing the line, I don't have much to worry about. He wanted me to do it this way, and for once we agreed, so here I am, a Seaman on the good ship Providence."

They ate a bit, and Zack asked, "How did you get that scar?"

"That's where the shark bit me." Then he laughed at the expression on Zack's face. "I'm just pulling your leg. I was surfing the point break at Rincon, which is bad enough, but I got caught by a cruncher. Dude, it had so much power it ripped my leash in half, and the skeg on my big gun hit me right across the head. Knocked me cold. Another surfer saw the whole gnarly thing, and lucky for me, he pulled me out. If he hadn't I'd of been a goner, Bro. DRT. They tell me my scalp was hanging down, almost covering my eyes. As it was, I drank a whole shaker full of Neptune cocktails. I was bleeding all over the place, and selling Buicks on the beach. One of the gang was a medic in 'Nam. He cleaned it out with Vodka, and sewed it up right there with a piece of old fishing line. Nice job, huh," he said with a grin.

Zack had a puzzled look on his face, and Holmann said, “Looks like I’m going to have to translate for you. You really need to learn English. Rincon’s one of the hardest places to surf in SoCal, or Southern California. I got caught in a hard breaking wave and tried to ride it but ‘crunchers’ are just too powerful. We are connected to our boards, or ‘big guns’ by lines called ‘leashes’ that attach to our ankles, so if we ‘wipe out,’ or fall off the board it won’t get away from us. The ‘skeg’ is the little rudder on the back. My stomach was filled with water, hence, the ‘Neptune cocktail,’ and ‘selling Buicks’ is when you barf up that cocktail. Oh, yeah, lest I forget, ‘DRT’ is dead right there. Enough questions about me. I notice sometimes you pronounce your R’s, and sometimes you don’t. Where are you from, anyway?”

“Vermont, and on my last ship everyone laughed at how I talked so I’m trying to lose my accent, but it’s sure a whole lot harder than I thought it’d be.”

“I’ll bet. What kind of work does your family do?”

“We have a dairy farm, and make maple syrup.”

“You should have brought some back with you. This shit sucks.”

“That’s the truth!”

They couldn’t have been more different, but they each saw something in the other they liked.

They got up, scraped their trays and went up to Quarters. Zack saw two boats in Second Division’s spaces: one was the Captain’s personal gig, and the other was a standard motor Whaleboat. They fell in by the davits with Kohen and his thuggish petty officers facing their troops. No chief or Deck Officer was present. The men looked like they had gotten no sleep, because they had gotten no sleep. El Jefe, on the other hand, looked sleek and fresh. His resemblance to the actor Phil Silvers was uncanny. After daily assignments were given, Kohen announced, “We have a new fish. Come on Vermont boy, front and center.”

Zack walked forward, did an about face and Kohen continued, “Vermont boy’s from the Hawke. He just got back from ‘Nam, and I know his old boss,

Chief McCoy. He's one of the best boatswains in the whole damn Navy. They were on one of the first destroyers assigned to 'Operation Market Time' and were involved in some hairy shit over there. Vermont boy ain't no boot, and McCoy tells me he pulls his weight. Can't ask for more than that. Welcome him. He's one of us now." The professor started clapping, and the rest followed suit.

When the men dispersed, El Jefe, said to Zack. "Come with me, there's someone you need to meet."

They climbed up to the forward five-inch mount and found a lean Spanish looking second class gunner at work with a scrub brush and hose. Kohen made the introductions: "This is Martin, the new deck ape I told you about, Herrera."

Herrera stopped what he was doing, took a close look at Zack, and said with a slight Spanish accent, "You were a sight setter on the Hawke, right?"

Zack nodded.

"Were you cross-trained?"

"Yup, we all were."

"Here's the deal. I am the Gun Captain, and the Boats here is the Mount Captain. You don't look big enough to me to handle projectiles."

"I might not be as quick as some, but I have done it. And see," he held his hands up, wiggled his fingers and said, "I still have all of them."

"That's always a good thing. We don't like fingers getting torn off in the breech. It slows us down. See that mount?" the gunner said, nodding his head at the one just aft of them, "It's crewed by a bunch of jarheads."

Zack blanched. Marines here? Oh crap! It would not be a good thing if any of those from the Kat had been transferred to this ship.

Both men noticed his reaction.

El Jefe asked, "You know why they're onboard?"

"Nope."

"Because they won't let us bring sheep!"

Zack laughed a little nervously.

Herrera said, “Screw ‘em. We outshoot ‘em every damn time and it drives ‘em nuts. Adds to their inferiority complexes. Get this: their Mount Captain is actually a full lieutenant. He probably has to do it because his sergeants are too friggin’ thick-headed to figure out how to use anything more complicated than a slingshot. Anyway, it offends his sense of manliness when a lowly second class petty officer like me regularly puts him to shame. It’s funny to see. After each mission the arrogant puke lines ‘em all up at attention, and reams them out like kindergarteners.

“We sit around and watch and laugh at ‘em. It gives me a purpose. It makes my life worth living. I don’t want those maggots to ever beat us. I know what a bitch it is chasing those numbers around, but if your reflexes and reactions aren’t fast enough, I need to find someone else whose are.”

“We fired more than a few shells in ‘Nam, and no one evah complained.”

“Okay, I’ll give you a try, but if you mess up, you’re gone.”

Zack remembered Chief McCoy, and thought, at least I didn’t have to play that danged slap game this time around.

AT LUNCH WITH the professor, Zack said, “Am I the only one, or does El Jefe look like Sgt. Bilko?”

The professor furtively looked around, making sure they weren’t overheard, “Don’t even think it, let alone say it. Everyone in Second Division has a nick-name. I tagged Kohen with ‘El Jefe’ and the ‘Big Kahuna’ which by the way is our surfing god. We had a new fish onboard who made the mistake of calling him Bilko to his face, and it was catastrophic. I think Kohen’s afraid it’ll stick. First he sent the poor fish down to the galley where he spent six-weeks in the scullery steaming mess trays and silverware. Once he came back El Jefe traded him off to First Division, and their chief continued screwing around with him. Put him down in the chain locker. Made him scrape and paint the whole damn thing without ventilation. Could have killed him. He ended up going AWOL, and hasn’t been seen since.

“Hell, Kohen could be Phil Silvers’ twin. I don’t know, maybe they were adopted out to different families at birth. They even act the same, but one’s on a TV show, and this one here isn’t, so button your lips.

“He runs Second Division like a family, and he covers for his troops no matter what they do. In return he demands total loyalty from them, and believe me he gets it. His apes would die for him, and no one in Second Division ever goes to Captain’s Mast. It all gets settled right down in the compartment. He’s the judge, jury, and executioner.

“He might come across as a jolly guy, but don’t let that fool you. Underneath it all, he’s a true blue Boatswain’s Mate, and just as tough as any of them. I’ve seen my share of bad asses on the beaches, but Kohen could take any of them. He’s got a left hook that’s so fast it’s invisible. I’ve seen him use it to stop fights before they even got started, so tread carefully, Vermont boy. His sunny personality does have a darker side.”

As they finished eating, a sailor passed through handing out flyers announcing Sunday’s church services. Zack asked the professor, “There are chaplains onboard?”

“Yep, this is a multi-denominational ship, with a preacher for almost every religion. We also have a library. We have everything but a swimming pool, and spa. The good ship Providence is really a cruise ship in disguise.”

At that moment Zack felt exactly as Lieutenant Giang had when he reported onboard the Hawke.

AFTER KNOCK-OFF, he found his way to the Catholic Chaplain’s office. The Priest had to be the oldest man onboard. Zack said, “I’d like to confess, Father.”

“All right.” He got out his purple stole and kissed it before putting it on. After a short prayer he said, “You may begin.”

Zack made the sign of the cross, and said, “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. I don’t rightly remember the last time I went to confession. I was on a destroyer in Vietnam without a chaplain.”

“That’s okay. Continue, my son.”

“My conscience is burdened, Father. We did terrible things to the people over there. We burned their homes and their villages, and our guns weren’t always real good at telling the difference between the Cong and the civilians, either. It’s marked my soul and I’m losing my faith. I can’t believe there’s a God who’d let these things happen.”

The Priest was silent for a long time. Then he said, “I’ve been a chaplain for thirty years. This is my third war, my first in the Navy. I’ve said Mass on many a battlefield, and administered Last Rights more times than I care to remember. I’ve seen much of what you talk about. After the Chosin Reservoir in Korea, I went through exactly the same crisis of faith you’re having now. The ground there was covered with bodies and parts of men as far as I could see. The screams of the dying were horrible to hear. Our soldiers were calling for their mothers and wives as they died in agony. The Chinese were screaming out what must have been the same things in their own language. On that terrible day, the frozen snowy ground was as much red as it was white. Like you, I thought, how can there be a God who allows this kind of carnage? If He exists, He must truly be a cruel and angry God, indeed.

“For many years afterwards I asked the Lord to help me better understand His true nature. He is testing you as He did me. Few are given the special Grace to have the difficult thoughts you are having. One day, as I was saying Mass, it came to me. God wasn’t absent from the Chosin Reservoir. He was there, and He was weeping at the folly of man.

“You see, my son, He has given us freewill. God does not cause war, man does. There have always been those amongst us who deliberately choose to suppress and destroy their consciences. If they do not repent of this sin, all that is sacred and holy within their souls will wither and die. This in turn creates a spiritual vacuum which is soon filled with pure evil. Unfortunately for us all, these people are often found in positions of great power and will lead us to war for their own vanity and personal gain. We are not accountable for their deeds. God alone will judge them when their time comes.

“So, for this, I give you no penance. You have committed no sin. I ask you instead to pray for the Grace of Illumination every night. Do you have anything else to confess?”

After Zack told him about Tally, the Priest said, “That’s another matter entirely. The penance for your lustful sins of the flesh will be three Rosaries. Now make a good Act of Contrition.”



CHAPTER 20

IN THE MARINE BARRACKS at the Subic Bay Naval Station, Lance Corporal Boudreau was angrily packing his duffel bag. He had been ordered back to the states. The last four months had been a living hell for him. Even now he was wracked with pain and needed a cane to walk. It all began when he woke up thrashing around in a bed in the Subic Bay Hospital. A nurse came running with concern and worry in her every step. She stabbed a needle in him and sent him back to sleep. Oh man, how he had come to love that morphine. It was the only thing that stood between him and the unendurable agony. The next time he came around she was ready for him with enough of a dose to ease the pain, but still leave him conscious. She said, “It’s time to wake up, sleepyhead.”

More like time to face the music, he thought. His body had been systematically destroyed. He had several broken ribs, both bones in his lower right leg had been fractured, but the fibula, not the tibia, had been broken clean through. His leg had been immobilized in a traction cast which required him to remain in bed for six long weeks. His jaw had been busted

and wired shut. He was missing three of his front teeth, two on top, and one on the bottom. The rest had been successfully re-implanted. He'd remember those fuckers every time he ate, when he could eat, that is. For six weeks he couldn't ingest any solid food, and as a result he was thin as a rail. He also had numerous minor fractures in every extremity, and his body was covered with contusions, hematomas and lacerations, some requiring stitches, some not. And his testicles? The swelling had gone down quite a bit, but they were still the size of grapefruits, and hurt far worse than anything he had ever experienced in his entire life. Somehow, someday those fucking squids were going to pay for that big time!

About the only injury they fixed right was his broken nose. The docs told him he was lucky. Lucky? Somewhere he had once seen a poster with a picture of a scrawny dog and it read, "Lost: three-legged, one-eyed, neutered, tailless, toothless dog. His name is Lucky." Lucky like that, he thought. Just call me fucking Lucky.

The healing had not only been horrendously painful, but was humiliating as well. Six weeks of bed pans. The Navy nurses were overloaded with patients, and they sure took their sweet time dumping it. There wasn't a damn thing he could do either. They seemed to enjoy his embarrassment. In the old days he would have kicked their snooty asses, slapped them senseless. Now he was at their mercy.

The ward stank worse than the Shit River, and it wasn't just hot, it was sweltering. The useless ceiling fans did little to move the fetid air. He had never sweated so much, not even in boot camp, and he was covered with some kind of a weird jungle rash, maybe leprosy, he morosely thought. They had trouble moving him because of the complicated traction device, so they rarely changed his filthy, sopping wet sheets.

His hearing was still fine though, and he could hear the little Navy bitches whispering to each other, tittering and making their stupid nurse jokes about his giant-sized balls. The itching under the cast was intolerable, and he was in an open ward surrounded by squids, nursed by squids. If he

had hated them before, it was nothing compared to how he felt about them now. He didn't know who had done this to him, so he held the whole damn tribe accountable. Hell, for all he knew it could have been some of these same assholes right here in the ward with him.

IN THE BEGINNING, and that's how he thought of it, for it was clearly the beginning of a new chapter in his life; he could remember nothing that had been done to him. He blanked out every time he tried to recall how he had ended up here. The doctors advised him this was normal. "Retrograde Amnesia" they called it. When trauma of this magnitude is inflicted on a human body, they said the mind blocks out the event for self-protection and to promote healing. As he recovered he might or might not regain his memories of that fateful night.

THE DOCTORS KEPT the inspectors at bay for as long as they could, but ONI had access to Boudreau's medical records, and the day came when two burly detectives in civilian clothes came barging into the ward, and demanded to see him, doctors' protests be damned. They were hard-looking men who exuded a subtle air of menace. They were more than a little intimidating, and they knew it. It often served them well in their line of work.

They set chairs next to his bed, sat down, and strained to understand his answers through his wired jaw.

"Do you have any idea who did this to you?"

By now he had a vague recollection of white uniforms.

"Squids," he replied venomously.

The investigators didn't appreciate his tone, or the obvious contempt it conveyed for their branch of service.

"Did you recognize any of them?"

"No."

"We have a list of all the ships that were here the night this occurred. If we read it to you, do you think it might jog your memory?"

“No, I can’t remember a thing. I thought I’d been run over by a jitney until the doctors told me what really happened.”

“We have several reliable witnesses who say your attackers came off the Black, but we went right through the whole damn crew and couldn’t find a shred of evidence. It makes me wonder if you were ever, um, maybe a little too...uh, ‘diligent’ shall we say, in your duties with anyone from that ship?”

“No, and I resent that question. I’ve never been ‘too diligent in my duties,’ at least not the way you mean it.”

“Let me put it differently. Were you maybe a little too ‘zealous’ with any of them?”

Boudreau shook his head slightly, “No.” Any more movement would have brought on a massive headache.

“Okay, were you ever a little too ‘zealous’ in your duties with anyone else you can think of? And I believe you understand exactly where I’m going with this.”

The other investigator jumped in, “Let’s cut the bullshit, Boudreau. My partner sometimes tries to be nice and it can confuse things. I’m a bit more plainspoken. So, let me ask you this: did you or any of your rogue buddies beat the shit out of anyone from the Black? Maybe give them a tour of the base before you brought them back all bloody to their ship? Maybe give them a reason to want a piece of you, to want some pay-back?”

Boudreau didn’t care for this particular line of questioning. He and his pals were always “diligent and zealous in their duties” exactly as the detective implied. And why wouldn’t they be? It was one of the perks of the job. They had wailed on more sailors than he could possibly remember. A list of them would be just too damn long to be of any use whatsoever. It would take years to check them all out. Besides, if he ever admitted any of it, there’d be a shit storm that would reach way beyond himself, and he and a lot of his cronies would soon find themselves sharing new lodgings in the cross bar hotel. Better to keep his wired mouth shut and take one for the Corps. It was a classic “Semper fi” moment.

“Never!”

“That’s not what we heard.”

“Yeah, we heard different.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, and I can’t remember shit! I’ve got some kind of amnesia. Ask the doctors! Get the fuck out of here, I need my pain medication! Nurse, nurse,” he called as loudly as someone with a wired jaw could.

“Come on, Boudreau, if you want us to catch the pukes who did this to you, you gotta give us some help.”

“Nurse! Nurse!”

The detectives looked at each other wearily, stood up and left.

IN FRONT OF the hospital one of the inspectors remarked, “What an asshole.”

“Yeah, sometimes shit happens to the right person.”

“You check out the smell on him?”

“How could I not? It almost made me puke.”

“Damn nurses need to dump his bed pan once in a while. Maybe even wash him once a month.”

“It’s gonna take more than a sponge bath to square him away. Whoever got ahold of him must of hated his guts big time. It had to be personal. I’ve never seen anybody beat that bad...this side of an autopsy table that is. Man, it looks like it was done with surgical precision. Very methodical.”

“Probably Boatswain’s Mates. It has everything but a deck ape’s signature on it.”

“I wonder what they used on him? It wasn’t just fists and boots.”

“Looked like maybe a baseball bat or a pool cue to me.”

“I hate to say it, but he was our last hope, and he ain’t talking. I think he’s afraid to open the ‘diligent and zealous in his duties’ door.”

“He should be. We know damn well what those bastards were doing. We just can’t prove it.”

“Look, this case is going nowhere fast. All those jarheads are too damn scared to talk. How about we close it out?”

“I agree. We’ve wasted too much time on it already. This investigation has been about as productive as banging my dick against a wall.”

“You got that right. Why don’t we go back and see if we can find whoever it was kicked the crap out a those two Shore Patrol?”

“Yeah, sounds like a plan. That one still sticks in my craw.”

“Mine too. They couldn’t remember anything either, but it’s been a while. Maybe some of it’s come back to ‘em by now.”

“Okay, we’ll scope it out, and I’ve gotta say it wouldn’t surprise me even a little if it was connected to the Black. It happened the same friggin’ night Boudreau got stomped, and it was only a couple of alleys away from the Kat.”

And that is how the Navy forgot about Lance Corporal Boudreau, but Lance Corporal Boudreau never forgot about the Navy. Not for a minute.

WHEN THE LEG cast came off Boudreau knew he was in serious trouble. The doctor and nurses couldn’t keep it off their faces. The Orthopedic Surgeon told him, “I’m afraid it didn’t heal like it should have, but it was a difficult surgery. It’s highly unusual for blunt force trauma to be powerful enough to shatter your fibula and not to have smashed through your tibia as well. It was a mess, one of the worst I’ve ever encountered. The good news though is you’ll be walking again soon...but with an obvious limp.”

Then it was another six weeks of rehab. His therapist was tougher than any drill instructor he had ever known at Paris Island. She was merciless, but in the end it didn’t make much difference. He failed his physical and was being processed out of the Corps with a medical discharge. His hopes, dreams, and career came crashing down around him. This wasn’t supposed to happen. It was those fucking squids fault. He didn’t know how, but someday he’d even the score.

BOUDREAU ENTERED A period of dark depression. He was alone, completely cut-off. His friends had been interviewed by those ONI maggots and were afraid that if the detectives looked a little closer, dug a little deeper, they'd find out how widespread the kidnappings, for that's what the phony "arrests" really were, had become. And with every kidnapping, of course, came a beating. His fellow Marines shunned him as completely as ever the Amish turned their backs on one of their own.

He didn't know where he'd go, what he'd do when he got out. The Corps was his life, his home. He had six years in and was going for twenty. With no one else to turn to, he called an old mentor, a friend who had retired and was working for the government somewhere in Washington DC.

"WELL, AS I live and breathe, if it isn't Lance Corporal Boudreau. Haven't heard from you in a while. What's the haps?"

Boudreau quickly filled him in.

Gunnery Sergeant Victor Malroy, retired, was stunned.

"Some squids did this to you and you don't have any idea who?"

"That's about the size of it, Gunny. They cold-cocked me from behind. I never saw it coming. ONI looked into it but couldn't find squat. I'm on my way back to Pendleton next week to get discharged."

"Have you thought about what you're going to do when you're out?"

"I don't know, Gunny. I haven't gotten that far. I still can't get my mind around it. They just told me I'm going out on a medical."

"I'll tell you what Boudreau, when you finish up at Pendleton, come to Washington. I work for the Veterans Administration. My department takes the laws Congress passes, and figures out how to implement 'em. We're the gears that run the machine. You were always hard charging and loyal. Come on out and I'll give you a job. You'll feel right at home here. It's like having an administrative job in the Corps. I staff my section exclusively with Marine veterans. I won't hire anyone else. Hell, we've got more Marines in this building than they have in Camp Lejeune, and we're all still proudly

serving our country, just in a different capacity. I even think there's a couple of guys here you might know."

He was overwhelmed by the generous offer, and said, "Okay, Gunny, I can't thank you enough for this. I have nowhere else to go."

"Don't worry about it. We look after our own. You know that. Once a Marine, always a Marine. Semper fi, Lance Corporal Boudreau."

"Semper fi, Gunny."

Boudreau had nothing to lose, so after his discharge he took Gunnery Sergeant Mallory up on his offer and went to work for the Veterans Administration in Washington, DC.



CHAPTER 21

ZACK FIT INTO life onboard his new ship as smoothly as a key slides into a well used lock. To be sure, the Providence was much larger than the Hawke but the routine here was a lot more relaxed. During the day they chatted as they worked. Men on errands from different divisions passed through their spaces, and greetings were usually exchanged. Herrera was constantly out fussing with his guns, and always had something to say. The Marines took good care of their mount, too, but made a point of never talking to the sailors. It was obvious they'd rather be stationed anywhere but here. The Big Kahuna ran a friendly division and was easy to get along with as long as you didn't shirk your assignments.

The professor hit the nail on the head when he called it a cruise ship. Second Division stood no regular underway watches. They turned-to, ate, played cards, and slept through the night. During General Quarters and Conditions of Readiness they manned Herrera's mount and magazines, but compared to a destroyer, it was still laid-back duty.

Two days after Zack reported onboard, they went to sea, and evidently the Captain didn't have a wife who wanted him home on weekends. They stayed out for three weeks.

The sleep deprived crew was put through the usual pre-deployment rigors while they steamed up and down the West Coast, sometimes slowing down long enough to blow up all the targets at the firing range on San Miguel Island. Herrera never said a word to Zack about setting sights, so he knew he'd passed muster. Had he not, he'd have been thrown out on his ear.

THE PROVIDENCE NEVER traveled alone. There were always other ships operating with her, mostly destroyers, and every now and then, the occasional carrier. Their Captain, a grizzled "Four Striper," the Navy's equivalent of a "Full Bird Colonel" led the Task Force, directing his ships like an orchestra conductor conducting a symphony. There was a constant stream of communication traffic between the cruiser and her Task Force. The signalmen were much busier here than on the Hawke. Jenkins, whom he had met when reporting onboard, was always trooping in and out of the bridge with messages, and they'd shoot the breeze when they could find the time.

Zack was monitored just as closely on the helm as he had been in the gun mount. But here the Quartermasters ran the show because many of the Providence's boatswains had never spent more than just enough time on the bridge to advance in rank.

AT FIRST ZACK over-steered the ship, and then over-corrected. He used too much rudder, and it drove the QMs wild.

One night when they were operating in tight formation with four destroyers, Stevens, the QM of the Watch, said to him, "Dammit, Martin, you're doing it again. Pay attention!"

He came over, stood beside Zack, and waited for another course change.

The OOD ordered, "Right full rudder, come to course Two-seven-zero."

Zack repeated back, “Right full rudder, come to course Two-seven-zero, aye, sir,” and spun the wheel.

“Didn’t I just tell you to slow it down, Martin? You need to keep in mind that this ship displaces 13,600 tons and your average tin can only displaces 3,400! On top of that we have a draft of twenty feet. It might not sound like a lot, but that’s five feet deeper than what you’re used to. A destroyer is much more at the mercy of the sea. It gets shoved around by the currents and waves. They travel lighter and ride higher in the water. This ship digs in! You always slam the helm and then you throw too much opposite rudder to counter the swing, and then you have to recorrect again and again. Instead of going straight, you’re zigzagging, and you have to stop doing that. I want you to slow it down, not a lot, but slow it down, so that when you come by Two-five-zero to Two-five-five, you’re going to start bringing the rudder back to amidships and then throw a little left rudder out to stop it exactly on the ordered course. You have to anticipate! Just remember, cruisers are twice as long and pack three times the weight of your last ship. Listen, I know you can do it. If I didn’t, you’d be long gone by now, but it’s time for you to adapt and apply your experience to the Providence. The Providence ain’t gonna adapt to you.”

“Thanks, boss,” Zack said with a smile.

“Okay now, let’s do it again, but this time my way.”

“Left full rudder, come to course One-six-five.”

“Left full rudder, come to course One-six-five, aye, sir.”

“Now get it right this time, dammit.”

And Zack did.

Stevens punched him hard on the shoulder and said, “It’s about time, Martin. You’re not driving a speedboat anymore.”

ZACK THOUGHT HE was the luckiest man alive when he was on the Providence’s helm. Steering the gray monster was the thrill of a lifetime, and it wasn’t long before the QMs stopped watching his every move. Zack

learned to steady the enormous cruiser like he'd gentle a spooked horse. Soon he found himself spending more time handling the ship than running errands for the OOD and the boatswain. The other helmsman didn't like it, but Zack liked it just fine.

THE PROVIDENCE AND her exhausted crew returned to San Diego with two weeks left before departure to Vietnam. Leaves were cancelled, but there was still liberty. The professor knew everyone aboard the ship and was well respected; however he was looked upon with bemusement by the officers. They treated him like a relative who had fallen upon hard times. He was always affable with a cheerful grin and viewed everything with wry humor.

After the ship was moored he got permission to use the phone, went over to the pier and stood in line for close to an hour. When it was finally his turn, he called the operator, put in the required amount of change, and dialed his sister's number.

"Hello?"

"Hey Barb."

"Hey Bill, where are you now?"

"Back in San Diego. Look, we're out of here for good soon. I've got a couple of irons in the fire and think I can wrangle five, maybe six days off this floating prison. I'd like to come up to the beach cottage and get together with you and Paul before we ship out."

"Of course, Bill. Tell me when, and we'll meet you there."

"Good. One other thing: I'd like to bring along a friend."

Barb laughed, "You've added to your collection again. What, or should I say, whom have you found now?" When they were growing up, other kids collected rocks and stamps. Not Bill, he collected people and the more off-beat they were, the more he liked them. Look at his wave worshipping buddies, she thought, they were clannish and distrusted outsiders, and lived completely different lives than everybody else. She didn't know it, but that also described Vermonters to a "T."

“You and Paul are going to love this guy. He was raised on a farm somewhere in the backwoods of Vermont. If you can believe it, the first time he ever left the state was when he joined the Navy. He’s really old-fashioned, a throwback to a different time, but smart as hell in an ‘aw shucks’ kind of way. His last ship was in the thick of it in ‘Nam and he handles himself well. He’s got some grit. I know you and Paul are going to want to spend some time with him. Hell, Paul’ll probably cage him up and bring him back to Stanford to study.”

“I’ll tell him. Sounds like fun times. Of course, Bill, bring him along. Your friends never fail to amuse us.”

“Nope, this one is not to be taken as a source of amusement, he’s anything but that. I’d say he’s more America than he is American. He belongs to the America you academics don’t know exists, or if you do, refuse to acknowledge. I think you both might actually learn a thing or two from this guy.”

“You do make him sound interesting. What’s his name?”

“Funny you should ask. We don’t use first names much in the Navy. His last name is Martin, but everyone here just calls him ‘Vermont boy.’ ”

“You can certainly pick them, Bill. I’ll tell Paul. We’ll look forward to meeting him.”

“Okay then, Barb, I’ll call you in a couple of days when I have it all lined up.”

THE PROFESSOR FOUND Zack on the mess decks at lunch, set down his tray, and sat across from him. “Hey, Vermont boy, you want to come with me to my sister’s place?”

“Where does she live?”

“She and her husband live in Palo Alto. He’s a professor, a real professor of Contemporary History at Stanford University. My sister has her Masters in Political Science and is almost finished with her PhD, but we’re going to her beach cottage in Santa Barbara.”

“Where’s that exactly?”

“A couple of hours north of L.A.”

“If you’re planning on hitching, leave me out.”

“No, no, I have a car in the off-base parking lot.” When Zack hesitated, Holmann said, “Come on, Martin, you joined the Navy for travel and adventure. You need to get out more, broaden your horizons and stop being so provincial.”

Provincial, thought Zack. What does that mean? Hell, as usual, he only understood about half of what the professor said, but didn’t want to appear ignorant so he replied, “All right, but how are we going to get time off? You’re not planning on going AWOL, I hope.”

“Fear not, Vermont boy, all has been arranged. A few shekles recently crossed El Jefe’s palm and we both have seventy-two hour liberty. He has also conveniently arranged for other apes to take our duty the day before and for two days after.”

IN DRESS WHITE UNIFORMS, they joined the line of sailors flowing through the gate, and walked over to the parking lot. The professor unlocked the door of his blue and white 1965 Ford Bronco. Zack was impressed. It looked like a pickup with a box built over the bed, but the interior was set up like a station wagon. They tossed their overnight bags in the back and climbed in. Zack asked, “What kind of car is this?”

Holmann replied, “You are currently riding in a Ford Bronco. I suspect the reason you appear so thunderstruck is because when they came out, you were off in a foreign land protecting America from the scourge of Communism.”

“It looks sort of like an International Scout.”

“It’s like a Scout that’s been turbocharged. This baby moves. It’s the same sort of rig, and has a low-range four-wheel drive you just wouldn’t believe.”

“I’d sure like to try one of these out on our muddy roads in the spring.”

They quickly rolled down the windows. What the Bronco lacked was an air conditioning system. The day was all blue skies, and fry-eggs-on-the-sidewalk hot.

As they drove onto the I-5 North, Zack said, “You sure as hell didn’t buy this with Navy pay. Where’d you get it?”

“Where do you think? I told you before, my dad has lots of bread. He got tired of having his chauffeur pull my Woody out of the sand every time I got the damn thing stuck, so he bought me this instead.... Ahh, I see that lost look again. I’ll translate: a Woody’s one of those old Ford station wagons with wooden sides. No better vehicle for hauling surfboards, except maybe this.”

Zack was more than a little curious, “What exactly does your dad do for work?”

“You want the long or the short version?”

“Might as well make it the long one.”

“That’s what I figured you’d say. The only way I can really explain it is to tell you a little of our family history first.”

“No hurry. We’ve got all day.”

The professor thought a bit, and finally spoke, “All right, Vermont boy, my great, great, great grandfather, Gerd Holmann, was born in Prussia sometime around 1815. He and his folks were sharecroppers for a wealthy Baron. In the early 1840’s Germany wasn’t unified yet, and all of the countries in that part of Europe were busy redefining their borders, which is a polite way to say they were trying to steal land from each other. Denmark claimed territory that was well within the German Confederation’s boundaries, so both countries started building up their armies and getting ready to go to war. Germany had the draft, but it wasn’t like here where you serve your two years and then go home. Once you were in their army that was it. You stayed in until there was a truce or you got killed. Gerd knew at best, he’d probably be an old man before he got out, and he also knew the way the conflict was heating up, he didn’t have a whole lot of time before he’d be in the trenches

waiting for the lead to fly. Not everyone was happy about it, and people were fleeing in droves. The first of the neighboring farmers to get out settled in Belleview, Michigan and set up a little German colony there. Michigan was giving away land to anyone who would homestead it.

“Gerd had a wife, two sons and a younger brother. His father had saved enough money to take them all to America. Being able to have land of their own would be a dream come true. When their wagons were packed up and ready to go, the Baron came by and demanded they pay him before he’d allow them to leave. He and Gerd argued about it and Gerd ended up beating the crap out of him. You’d better believe the Holmann clan cleared out of there real quick after that.

“They sailed into Philadelphia and bought horses, wagons, and guns. They had been warned: west of Pennsylvania was the frontier. It was a dangerous trip and many who started out were buried along the way.

“When they got to Belleview it was too late. All the good acreage had been claimed so they ended up with property no one else wanted. It was wooded, had a small creek running through it, and the soil was a thin covering of loam over red clay. Since it couldn’t be farmed, Gerd built a stone kiln, and he and the family went into the business of turning that clay into bricks. They actually made out a lot better than most of the farmers. Even today there’s plenty of sturdy old homes still standing in Michigan built out of Holmann bricks.

“Their business continued to grow, but when gold was discovered here in California, Gerd came down with a bad case of ‘gold fever.’ In spite of the family’s objections, he packed up and headed west. He still didn’t speak much English, kind of like you, Vermont boy, so that didn’t make the journey any easier. There was no law west of the Mississippi, and there were Indians and outlaws out there just waiting to kill you and see what you brought them.

“But Granddad Gerd made it to the gold fields and he was one of the first there. He staked his claim, went to work, got lucky and struck it rich, and because he did, he became a target. The mining camps were treacherous

places. Not all who inhabited them were hard working miners. Several gangs of sadistic drunks made their living there killing and robbing those who made it big and everybody knew Gerd had hit the mother lode. The only law they had was 'vigilante justice,' but every so often the crooks'd shoot someone at random, just to keep the others from uniting and coming after them.

"Granddad was respected in that camp. He never went looking for trouble, but never ran from it either. You couldn't harvest that much gold without standing your ground and he'd left more than a few bodies in his wake. Family legend says he was a laid-back kind of guy, but definitely not one you'd ever want to cross. Granddad knew he was in serious trouble, so he went calling on the most ruthless gang's chief. They made a deal. For half of his strike, they'd get him and his gold safely to San Francisco. The boss was savvy enough to understand that it made more sense to accept Gerd's offer than trying to rip him off, and besides, if the other thieves tried to ambush them on the trail, it was never a bad idea to have an extra man on your side in a gunfight.

"After they got back to civilization and split up the treasure, Granddad decided the best way home was to book passage on a ship going to New York. The problem with that was they had to sail all the way down to the southern tip of South America, or 'Cape Horn,' which has some of the worst weather conditions on the planet. So, if they survived that leg of the journey, they'd continue up the Eastern Seaboard. It was a 14,000 mile voyage from hell that took anywhere from five to seven months. If all that wasn't bad enough, those ships were always filthy and infested with rats, so the passengers caught all kinds of strange diseases and thousands of 'em ended up buried at sea. You wouldn't even want to make that trip on the Providence, let alone a three masted schooner, Vermont boy.

"Back in the day, Santa Barbara was the biggest supply port on the West Coast. His ship stopped there for provisions, and Gerd took a good look around. He liked what he saw, talked to a few people and bought 450,000 acres for next to nothing. When he sent for his family, his dad said he was

too old to make the trip and decided to stay, but everyone else headed west. The land came with an enormous herd of cattle, and it wasn't long before Granddad controlled all of the supplies in Santa Barbara. If you wanted to replenish your ship, you had no choice but to buy from him.

"And, the property has been in our family ever since. So to answer your question, I guess my dad's kind of like a corporate CEO and a cowboy foreman rolled into one. He started working with his father when he was a young kid and learned the ranching business from the saddle of a horse. He's been running the show for a long time now. When he was still in his early twenties, my Grandfather was killed in a cattle stampede, so dad had no choice but to step up and take over. The ranch hasn't changed all that much from Granddad Gerd's day. We still raise livestock and grow citrus. Lately dad bought property up north and he's cultivating grapes. He thinks the day's going to come when our California Chardonnays'll be the best in the world. Most of the wine snobs laugh at him, but he just smiles and says, 'Time will tell,' and besides, it's like Granddad always said, 'He who laughs last, laughs best.' "

Zack found himself completely engrossed in the story as the professor continued, "I'm supposed to step into his shoes. Probably will, but I'm in no hurry. I'm kind of like the black sheep of the family. Every generation since, the oldest boy has been named after Granddad: 'William Gerd Holmann.' And every generation we switch back and forth from Gerd to Bill to avoid confusion. My dad's a Gerd and I'm a Bill. Speaking of which, what name do you go by? I can't very well introduce you to my family as 'Vermont boy' or Martin."

"I'm Zack."

"What's it short for?"

"Zachariah."

"Cool. Right out of the Bible, John the Baptist's dad, another old name. Glad to make your acquaintance, Zachariah."

"Glad to make yours too, Bill."

The professor reached over and they shook hands.

“What about your family? You’ve got me all talked out.”

So Zack told him about his family, his family’s farm, his home state of Vermont, his hopes for the future, and of course, Tally.

Holmann said, “Hmm, that might be a problem for you.”

“How so?”

“I’ve invited some friends over tonight, and there’ll be several beach bunnies that I thought might spark your interest.”

“I told you, I’m engaged to marry my girl back in Vermont and I’ve always been true to her.”

“I’d expect no less from you, Vermont boy, but I’m going to have to get you a blindfold.”

WHEN THEY REACHED L.A. it was every bit as bad as Zack remembered. The air tasted like used motor oil and burned his eyes. The drivers were still crazy. Bill wasn’t fazed. Not in the least. He drove just as recklessly as the rest, swerving into this lane or that with only inches to spare, giving the finger to this driver or that. It was like Old McDonalds Farm. Here a honk, there a honk, everywhere a honk, honk. The Bronco had no seat belts and Zack hung on for dear life.

AFTER SURVIVING THE L.A. auto gauntlet, Holmann switched over to the Pacific Coast Highway and followed the shoreline north. The scenery quickly changed to tall rugged mountains reaching down to the crystal clear, steel blue waters below.

Zack asked, “How come the officers treat you...I don’t know, different?”

The professor chuckled, “That’s because I went to college with some of them. They were all rah, rah, ROTC boys, except for Lowenstein. He surfed too. We weren’t exactly friends, but every once in a while we’d end up on the same beaches. He was two years ahead of me and I’ll never forget the first time we ran into each other on the ship. He was in khakis

and I was in dungarees. I was fresh out of boot camp and had been put in Second Division. We both started laughing. Word got out pretty quick on the officer grapevine. So I'm a freak of nature, a deck ape with a bachelor's degree. And the weird thing is, I'd rather be an ape than an officer any day. They didn't have any fun back in college, and they sure as hell don't seem to be having any now." Making a mock serious face, he said with a British accent, "They all take themselves ohhh, sooooo bloody seriously," which got a laugh out of Zack.

BILL TURNED ONTO an almost invisible two-track that wound its way through hilly dunes. About a mile later they came into a clearing and pulled up to the "cottage." Zack had formed a picture in his mind of a quaint little seaside home. Nothing could have been further from the truth. He goggled at the sight. It was a gray clapboarded mansion with half a dozen dormers on the top floor. The view of the ocean stretched all the way to infinity, while the waves washed onto an unspoiled sandy beach. The only things visible in the opposite direction were spectacular jagged cliffs. There wasn't a neighbor anywhere. They probably own everything for miles around, Zack thought, and he was right. He was starting to get the picture.

Barb and Paul came out before they finished parking. She looked exactly like Bill, just shorter; a feminine version without his Frankenstein scar. She had the wide shoulders of a swimmer, long blond sun-bleached hair, and the same grin as her brother. Paul was a lot older than she. He was tall and thin and wore his long graying red hair in a pony tail. He had on a tweed sport coat and looked every bit of what he was: a college professor.

Barb whooped, "Yay, the Navy's here!" She hugged them both and the men shook hands as introductions were made. Barb beckoned, "Come in, come in. Don't just stand there."

The inside of the house was light and airy. It was open front to back with lots of sliding glass doors and large windows facing the magnificent seascape. If this was mine, Zack thought, I'd never leave.

Barb said, "You need to get into something more comfortable. I'll be back in a minute." She zipped out of the room and returned with a long-legged set of swim trunks called "baggies" and a tie-dyed T-shirt. She pointed Zack to a bathroom telling him, "Go ahead and put these on."

When he came out with his folded uniform, she brought him upstairs into a bedroom overlooking the beach and said, "Mi casa es su casa."

Dang, he mused, don't these Holmanns ever say anything in plain English?

Realizing he didn't understand, she explained, "It means my house is your house, Zack. A friend of my brother is my friend too," and it seemed to him that her smile of welcome brightened up everything around her.

They regrouped in the kitchen and made Zack comfortable with small talk. And then Bill stood up and said, "I don't know about you guys, but I'm hot and sweaty from the trip. Anyone want to take a swim?"

PAUL AND BARB changed into bathing suits and everyone walked down to the water's edge. The heavy surf was crashing in and it looked forbidding to Zack. He wasn't so sure this was such a great idea. He remained on dry land and watched the others dive in. When Bill came up, he saw the doubt written on his friend's face, and he shouted loud enough to be heard over the roaring of the waves: "You can swim, can't you? Come on, Zack, you'll be fine." He floated around like an otter and continued, "There's a strong undertow here and we can use it to take us wherever we want to go. It's easy. Get out here, Vermont boy, and do what I say and do what I do."

Zack waded in and it was cold; even colder than the Kingdom's lakes in early spring. He swam to Bill and a gigantic breaker came slamming in. While it began receding back out, Bill hollered, "SWIM!" and as Zack did so, he could feel himself being sucked seaward. Before the next one was fully upon them, Bill told him, "Take a deep breath and get ready to go under... NOW!" and they both ducked below the surface and looked up and saw

it pass harmlessly overhead. They repeated this maneuver until they were beyond the turbulence of the surf zone.

They tread water, lazily drifting in the Pacific's steep yet gentle undulations, and with the same speculative look that Zack had gotten from Herrera and Stevens, Bill said, "You don't swim so badly for someone from a landlocked state."

"My dad taught me how when I was four. We fish a lot, so he wanted to make sure I wouldn't drown if I fell out of the boat. I learned a little about currents from our rivers, but it's nothing like this. This is wild!"

"For sure! Nothing in the world is like this, and you ain't seen nothing yet. We're gonna catch us a 'honker' and ride it all the way into the beach. It has to be just the right one though, so be patient. I'll know it as soon as I see it. When I start swimming, follow me, and if everything goes according to plan, the wave'll wrap us up and bring us back in so quick it'll take your breath away!"

Bill studied the sets with a practiced eye. Almost immediately he saw what he was looking for: a monstrous swell moving fast and growing larger than the rest. In an instant it was there and as it reared up and started to crest, he shouted "SWIM!" and it grabbed ahold of them in a powerful grip, picking them up higher than a one story building while speedily shoving them in front of it all the way to the shallows.

It was exhilarating!

"Come on, Vermont boy, let's do it again!"

It sounded good to Zack, and this time without any hesitation, he followed the professor back into the surf.

WHEN THEY WERE finally numb from cold, they crawled out laughing and went inside. Barb smiled when she saw them come in and told Bill, "I have your favorite dinner planned."

"I know you do. I could smell it all the way outside. Thanks Sis," and he gave her a wet, sandy hug which she didn't mind at all.

“You are more than welcome, Brother Bill. It’s so good to see you, and to have you home again.” Turning away to walk over to the cooking area, she wiped a tear from her eye. Once there, she started making a salad and prepping the abalone while the spiny lobsters, corn, and potatoes boiled.

There was a fire in the fireplace and the house was cozy and warm and the smells were delightful. The men helped themselves to beers. Paul said to Zack, “You must be a Red Socks fan...” and they talked about sports until the meal was ready.

It had been a day full of new experiences for Zack, and there was still more to come. He’d never even seen lobsters or pink abalones before, and now they were piled up on the table ready to eat! He thought they were absolutely delicious, and with Barb’s urging he ate plenty.

After cleaning up, Barb announced: “I know how rowdy you and your friends can get, Bill, so we’re spending the night at mom and dad’s. We’ll see you two in the morning. Have fun!”

THE LARGE ORB of an orange sun was slowly setting over the ocean, and cars started streaming down the driveway. Nearly all were old and badly battered, with surfboards either tied on roofs or sticking out of trunks. The men were dressed in baggies and T-shirts. The women wore T-shirts over bikinis. Their skin was tanned brown and their hair was bleached lighter by the sun. All were physically fit and looked like they could go a few rounds with Heavy Weight Champion Sonny Liston. Zack wasn’t sure whether they got in shape to surf, or surfing got them in shape, but he had learned the ocean demanded a lot of strength and stamina. And the girls? Zack didn’t want to look, but couldn’t help himself. They were all easy on the eyes at the very least. Surfing didn’t seem to have hurt their bodies at all.

No one came empty-handed. They brought cases of beer, jugs of wine, ice-chests, blankets, and folding chairs. Everyone headed straight for the beach. They chatted and joked with each other as they set up. Zack thought

they were as organized as the Navy, and seemed to have specific jobs which they went about with practiced efficiency.

One small group went down the shoreline looking for kelp, another went looking for driftwood and in no time they had a fire going. Someone produced a big transistor radio which competed with the sounds of the waves and the crackling of the growing fire. People played in the surf and the girls' bikinis left little to the imagination. Most were friendly but some, although not outright hostile or rude, were aloof. He wasn't sure whether it was because he was in the military, or that he was just an outsider. He understood distrust of strangers, but he still didn't understand the country's current contempt for those in uniform.

Ice-chests were opened and beers handed around. More abalones and lobsters were produced, wrapped in kelp, and put on coals by the side of the fire. Bill came over with a larger, shaggier version of himself. They were passing a rough looking, hand-rolled cigarette back and forth, taking big deep drags from it. The smoke smelled like leaves burning in the fall. Their eyes were half closed and Bill said to Zack, "I'd like you to meet my cousin, Pete."

With the now familiar Holmann grin, Pete said "Hey, how you doin' dude?"

"I'm doing fine, how about you?"

"If I was doin' any better there'd have to be two of me!"

Bill laughed and said, "You're probably seeing double now, anyway."

They shook, and Pete's hand was the size of a ham. You can tell a lot about a man when you shake, and Zack knew Pete could have easily reduced his hand to powder, but wouldn't. Pete liked the way Zack returned the pressure. Zack's hand wasn't as strong as his, but it was every bit as hard.

Pete asked, "You want a toke?" and offered him the cigarette.

Zack wasn't sure what they were smoking and asked, "What is it?"

"Grass."

"Huh?"

"Marijuana."

Zack was slightly shocked and declined, “No thanks.” No way, no how, he thought, but with characteristic Vermont tolerance, he wasn’t offended.

“Are you sure? Don’t knock it ‘til you’ve tried it.”

“I’ll stick with beer, thanks.”

That’s when he fully realized he wasn’t in Vermont. The scene overwhelmed him. He could never have imagined people living daily lives like this.

He looked around, taking it all in. The day had slipped into night after a magnificent orange sunset. A crescent moon was slowly making its way across the black, brilliantly star-studded sky. Red sparks flew upward as the bonfire blazed brightly, casting flickering shadows from those dancing to the radio’s blasting music onto each other and those sitting in a ring a short distance back. Others huddled near the fire, cold from coming out of the dark sea. He thought, how do these people live? What do they do for money?

He asked Pete, “What do you do for a living?”

“Construction mostly. I’m a framer. I do lots of post and beam.”

Bill cut in, “He’s so modest. He’s the best damn builder in Santa Barbara. My dad uses him whenever he can, but when the surf’s up, Pete’s gone.”

Their laughs sounded the same.

Zack said, “I’ve done a little carpentry, myself.”

“Vermont boy here is even more modest than you, Pete. When he says ‘a little’ he means ‘a lot.’ ”

“Good. I can always use an extra pair of hands. Why don’t you forget about the Navy and I’ll hire ya on?”

Bill chuckled, “You’d like that, wouldn’t you? You’d have him doing all the work while you hit the surf.”

“Life is short cousin, you’ve got to have priorities.”

AS THEY TORE into the lobsters and abalone, Zack asked Bill between bites, “Where do you get these?”

“We dive down and get ‘em. It’s illegal, but who’s to know? Barb got here early and dove a whole bunch of them. If you’re a lobster, you better hide if you see her swimming by.”

Maybe, thought Zack, California’s not so different than Vermont after all.

A young blond walked over to them and Zack could see the obvious Holmann resemblance. The only difference was her build. She was slender.

“Welcome home, Bill.”

“If it isn’t my favorite beach bunny cousin.”

“Knock it off,” she said with a mock, stern look and threw a surprisingly hard punch to his shoulder.

“Oww, she hits like a Holmann, too. Meet my cousin, Rhonda.”

“Is it just my imagination or is everyone here related to each other?”

“We are a fruitful tribe, young Zachariah. In this county Holmann is the most common name in the phone book.”

After Bill’s brief introduction, Rhonda announced, “Okay boys, you’ve had him long enough.” She took Zack’s arm, and as she tried to lead him off, she felt resistance. Looking up at him, she intuitively knew he was in love with someone back home. She smiled mischievously, raised her right hand in a two fingered Brownie salute, and said, “Scout’s honor, sailor, I’ll be good; I won’t bite.”

Zack couldn’t help but laugh, and she brought him over to two empty folding chairs next to the fire. Without asking, she got a couple of cans of beer out of a cooler, popped the tabs, handed him one and they sat.

Bill was right, Zack thought. I do need a blindfold. She was a knockout.

“I’ve heard about you. You’re Bill’s friend from the ship, the one that’s been to Vietnam. What’s it like over there?”

It seemed none of them supported the war, but they all wanted to hear about it. Zack was enjoying the evening far too much and wasn’t about to dredge up those memories when he had them firmly locked away, so he shifted the conversation back to her, “I like it here a lot better. Do you surf too?”

She looked at him thoughtfully and said, “Sure. Everyone does. Living this close to the beach, the ocean gets in your blood.”

“Do you work, or are you in college?”

“Actually, I’m in my first year of veterinary school up at UC Davis.”

Like most farmers, Zack had a lot of respect for animal doctors. These were the folks who made it possible for them to make a living by maintaining the health of their dairy herds. He gave a short whistle of surprise and approval, “That’s really something to be proud of, Rhonda. What do you plan on doing when you graduate?”

“My Uncle Gerd, who happens to be Bill’s dad, is paying my tuition. He’s tired of calling in outsiders whenever any of his livestock have problems, and he wants me on the land full time. Have you met him yet?”

“Nope.”

“You will. He’ll want to meet you. He’s an amazing guy. Easy going, but sharp as a tack. He runs the ranch more like an Army General than a boss. He was a major in World War Two and doing things the military way seems to work pretty well around here. I mean, he has so much going on: there are the herds of cattle, and thousands of acres of land under cultivation, not to mention citrus groves all over the place, and now he’s putting in vineyards up north. Each one has a division manager who acts as his captain. They have their own lieutenants and at the very bottom are the crew chiefs, or sergeants who supervise the cowboys and field laborers. I think the reason Uncle Gerd is so successful is because he really cares about people. He speaks Spanish like a native and he knows every one of his workers by name. It might not sound like a big deal, but believe me, that’s a whole lot of names to keep track of! Bill’s just as smart as his father, except he’s a screw-up. He never takes anything seriously. Everyone’s hoping he’ll straighten out after he finishes his hitch. He is sixth generation and none of us want to see the ranch go under or get sold off. Too many of us depend on it for our livelihoods.”

They chatted a bit more until one of the girls in a group noticed Rhonda and beckoned her over. Getting up, she said, "Nice talking with you, Zack. If I don't see you again before you leave, take care of yourself."

"Same here, Rhonda. You take care, too."

AS NIGHT SLOWLY gave way to dawn, the few partiers still standing fell like dominos. The surfers slept right where they were, in sleeping bags or wrapped tightly in blankets. Their slumbering bodies formed hilly little unmoving mounds up and down the beach. Seeing them lying there, Zack couldn't help but being reminded of Do Nuoc. He shivered, got another beer, and watched the untended fire die down to embers as he drank, alone with his thoughts. Then he walked wearily back to the cottage, found his room, crawled into bed and slept.

ZACK COULDN'T REMEMBER ever sleeping so late. His brain felt like it was wrapped with cobwebs. He looked out the window and saw Bill down by the water with Pete. The beach was pristine, showing absolutely no signs of last night's revels. He felt guilty and said to them, "Sorry I slept so late. If I'd a known I'd of come down earlier to help with the clean up."

Pete looked puzzled, "We didn't clean nothin' dude."

Bill added, "We take out what we bring in, it's about the only rule we have. You look like hell, Zack, a little too much booze last night? Let's hit the water. It'll clear your head out quicker'n a cup of coffee."

The surf was chilly and Zack didn't last long, but it did wake him up. He got out and went back to the cottage. Barb was in the kitchen making a platterful of lobster sandwiches. "Good morning, Barb, You eat them cold, too, I see."

"You eat them anyway you can. There's no way to ruin a lobster, as you shall shortly see."

He plunked himself down at the table. "Good morning, Paul."

Paul put down his newspaper and said, "Good morning, Zack."

“Bill says you’re a professor of Contemporary History. What exactly is that?”

“The short answer is that we study what’s happening today and try to determine what is significant enough to go into the history books tomorrow. You might not think so, but fifty years from now, I believe this decade will be regarded as a turning point in American culture, in its very way of life. We’ve never seen anything like it before. President Kennedy’s assassination, the Civil Rights Act, the anti-war riots, Negroes protesting throughout the south for the right to vote, our cities going up in flames, and let’s not forget the war in Vietnam. And you, too, my young friend, are part of history in the making.”

“How so?”

“I don’t just read the newspapers, Zack. I study them the way a preacher studies the Bible. Bill has mentioned what he knows about your tour on that destroyer and says your ship was in combat there. We never see so much as a word anywhere about the Navy, and for the life of me, I don’t know why. They tell us what the Marines and Army are doing. They give us the daily body count. They tell us of the bombings in Saigon, of Buddhist monks committing suicide with gasoline fires, but never a word about you guys. Someday the story will be told and when it is, I have no doubt your ship will be included.”

Bill came in and quietly sat down. He wanted to hear this.

“Considering the way things are now, it’s probably just as well we haven’t been in the news.”

“So, you’ve noticed that not everyone’s supportive of the war. Without being too intrusive, may I ask what you think about the protests?”

Zack mulled it over, and posed a question of his own: “What’s your opinion on it, Paul?”

“Fair enough. As a tenured professor, I try to keep my objectivity, to remain neutral, but I honestly believe this war is a big mistake. Although I haven’t marched, my sympathies lie with the dissenters.”

“What I don’t get is why they hate us so much. I mean, we’re Americans, the same as them.”

There was a knock on the door. Bill got up to see who it was. They heard him have a few quiet words with someone, then he said a little louder, “Hey, Zack, come here a minute, will you?”

Rhonda was there. “Hi, Zack, I came over to apologize for last night. I shouldn’t have asked you about Vietnam. I saw the look on your face and knew I hit a nerve. If I could take it back I would, and I wanted you to know I’m sorry.”

“Thanks, Rhonda.” Her thoughtfulness surprised him, and as she turned to leave Zack said, “Funny you should mention it, we’re talking about the war right now. Why don’t you come in?”

This time it was she who was hesitant.

Zack smiled, held up two fingers, and said, “Scout’s honor, Rhonda, I’ll be good. Come on in.”

She gave him a smile of her own, and followed him inside.

When they sat and greetings had been exchanged, Paul, eager to pick up where they had left off, said, “To answer your last question, the protestors regard any taking of human life as evil. Because you wear the uniform and prosecute this war, they see you all as morally corrupt killers, and therefore, you deserve anything bad that happens to you. But they also believe if they can convert you to their point of view and get you to desert, the slaughter will end.”

“Look it, in case you haven’t noticed, we’re not the only ones doing all the ‘slaughtering’ you mentioned.”

“They do have a point, though, Zack. If everyone in the military stayed home, the bloodshed would stop. I saw a sign at a campus rally that said, ‘Suppose they gave a war and nobody came?’ ”

“You don’t really believe that, do you? If we pulled out today, it wouldn’t change a thing....Come on, Barb, Bill says you’re studying Political Science. You should know more about this than any of us.”

“I want to hear what you think, Zack. This is the first chance we’ve had to talk with someone who was actually there.”

He took a deep breath trying to gather his thoughts, wondering at the same time how the hell he had ever gotten into a conversation like this with a couple of college professors. The room was silent for a moment, then Zack continued, “Okay, Barb, this is how I see it: the Communists started this war and they’re trying to shove their government and way of life down their southern neighbor’s throat. They’re a cruel and revengeful people, and don’t care how many civilians they have to torture or kill to do it. Anyone who stands up to them gets chopped down quick.

“The South Vietnamese are defending everything they hold sacred against an invading army of murdering thieves who want to take everything away from them including their religion, their families, their property, and their lives. It’s an all-out civil war. So, even if we go home, the killing won’t stop. The Cong would probably take it as a sign of weakness and step up their attacks. And with us out of the way, there’d be no one around to try and protect the civilians.” He looked directly at Paul and continued, “Listen, I didn’t learn any of this from reading fancy books. I’ve seen it with my own eyes. Let me make a prediction of my own, Mr. Contemporary History Professor: if the Viet Cong overrun the south, you’re going to see blood run in that land like it’s never run before.”

Rhonda jumped in, “But everyone knows war is wrong, Zack. The Bible even tells us, ‘Thou shalt not kill.’ ”

“You’re right. It does, Rhonda. Except it also tells us about all the battles God commanded the Israelites to fight, and if you look, there sure were lots of them. As odd as it sounds, sometimes wars save lives.”

Paul asked, “What do you think about the ‘draft dodgers’ who are moving to Canada?”

“Let ‘em leave, but don’t let ‘em come back. When they cross that border they should be stripped of their citizenship. Every man, woman, and child born here owes a debt to this country, and there are plenty of jobs in

the military where no one ever has to carry a gun. My dad was a medic in World War Two. He led litter parties behind enemy lines to rescue wounded soldiers. He became assistant battalion surgeon and was proud to say they operated on Germans, too. On our ship, we have a 'Lookout Division' that's full of anti-war guys. The most dangerous piece of equipment they ever handle is a pair of binoculars."

Rhonda asked, "All the same, they're still supporting the war, aren't they?"

"Yes they are. But they've found ways to do their duty that don't bother their consciences and, at the same time they're paying off their debt to America. Here's another one from the Good Book: 'Render unto Caesar, what is Caesar's.' If you read it, you'll see it says more about our obligation to the government than it does about taxes."

Barb wanted to know: "Do you think the demonstrations will have any effect in the long run?"

"I doubt it. They're going after the wrong people. When I reported aboard the Providence there was a signalman standing watch on the quarterdeck who said the protestors were wasting their time. He said they couldn't see the forest for the trees. Even our Captain is powerless to change anything. The politicians make all the decisions, not us, so if they're serious about ending this war; they need to go to Washington and stick their damn signs up all the Senators' and Congressmen's noses, not ours. If the President and that bunch tell us to stop, we all go home, and believe me, I'd like nothing better."

"It seems like you really take the protests personally, Zack."

"We all do, Rhonda. Put yourself in our shoes. One day you're fighting the Cong in Vietnam, the next you get off a plane in San Francisco, and you're spit on, mocked, and called every disgusting name in the book...you come home to find the country that sent you to war hates you for going. When I was hitching to San Diego, I got stuck on an entrance to the I-5 and someone pulled over. After I ran up to the car they threw a milkshake all over me and my dress blues. They taught us in boot camp that our uniforms

represent the United States. What they did was the same as desecrating our flag. All I know is, we don't do things like that in Vermont. We appreciate the sacrifices our servicemen and women make for us. When our nation needs us, we always answer the call, and if we have to, we don't run away to Canada, we go to war. I've got to tell you, it'll almost be a relief to go back. At least in Vietnam you know who the enemy is."

Bill couldn't help but notice that Zack was getting steamed up. This discussion has gone on a tad too long, he thought. It was time to bring it to a close. He stood up, stretched, and said, "Well, Professor Paul, did he pass the course?"

Paul took the hint. "You bet, Professor Bill. He could teach it. Thanks, Zack. I appreciate your candor. Bill always tells us we lose perspective in our academic ivory tower and you have certainly given me much to ponder. Your views were well reasoned and well stated.

Zack didn't reply. He was a little embarrassed for being so outspoken.

BARB SET DOWN the sandwiches, and she was right. You couldn't ruin lobsters. Even cold, they were delicious. After they ate, Rhonda asked, "Take a walk with me, Zack?"

AS THEY STROLLED along the beach, Rhonda said, "You know, Zack, I've spent my whole life here in California, and until now, I thought everyone in the whole country saw things exactly the way we do. But you've shown me there are other places out there, other communities that have very different ways of looking at things and I want to thank you for opening my eyes to that."

"I know the feeling, Rhonda. The first time I ever left Vermont was when I joined the Navy. Before then, I figured everybody lived the same way we did, too. After I reported onboard the Hawke I sure had a rude awakening. I ended up working and living alongside sailors of every race and religion who came from every state in the union. We learned real quick we needed

to find common ground and pull together if we were going to be able to do our jobs. But here's the thing, Rhonda: in spite of how unlike we may be, we're all still Americans and we have the right to protest this war. But hating someone for not thinking the same way you do about it is crazy, and it definitely doesn't bode well for our future."

"I'll say," she replied, and thought to herself, how can anybody his age be so righteous and self-assured? When he gets wound-up, he's like some figure out of the Old Testament. I know he's a lot younger than I am, but what a shame his heart belongs to someone else.

"I'm sorry, Rhonda, I don't know what's come over me. I feel like a talking fool."

"You're no fool, Zack, but enough talking. It's way too hot. Come on," she said as she pulled off her T-shirt, and ran into the surf.

THE NEXT MORNING after breakfast Barb said, "I've never seen anyone put away lobsters like you, Zack. So it's time you learned how to get your own."

Zack followed her outside to a large shed at the edge of the yard. When they went inside he was surprised to see a row of scuba tanks lining one wall. On a peg-board, hung rubber masks, snorkels, and tank regulators. There were bins with lead weights, and weight belts. There was a long clothing rack with various sized wet suit tops and bottoms. At the far end was a work bench with regulator parts and tools.

Barb said, "Welcome, to my private hideaway, Zack. I'll let you in on a little secret: I'd rather be under the waves than riding them, and today I'm going to show you why. We're going lobster hunting. Have you ever snorkeled?"

"A few times in the Philippines."

"Good. That makes it easier. Scuba is similar except better, because you can stay down longer. Are you up for this?"

Zack looked around in wonder and said, "Oh, yeah."

She eyeballed him critically, and selected a wet suit top called a “Beaver-tail,” which went down to the waist, but had a flap that went between the legs and attached with toggles in the front to keep it from riding up. She put ten pounds of lead on a weight belt, and picked out a mask, held it on his face saying, “Sniff in hard.” When he did, she let go, and it remained in place. “That’ll work,” she said, busily putting together fins, tanks, regulators, and shoulder harnesses.

“It’s not that difficult, Zack, but there are some things you need to know, and once we’re in the water we can’t talk, so listen good, and if you have any questions stop me, and ask away.”

“Okay, Barb.”

“We’re going to put on the beavertails, weight belts, and tanks right here. We’ll bring the masks and fins down to the beach. The seas are flat this morning, or as flat as they ever get here. The regulator attaches to the tank and works like a snorkel. You put it in your mouth and breathe. Get a good grip on the mouthpiece with your teeth, and if you think it’s going to come out in the surf, hold it in place with your hand. The button on the front of it is called the ‘Purge button.’ If you push it, it’ll let out a blast of air. If you get a mouthful of water, or your regulator fills up, either exhale hard through the mouthpiece or hit the purge to get it out. Just make sure you leave your lips loose, and put your tongue on the roof of your mouth when you hit the purge, or it’ll push the water down your throat.

“The tanks are steel, and I weighted you out a bit heavy. You’re going to have to swim to keep off the bottom, but if we get caught in currents or strong surf, use that weight to hug the bottom. The currents are weaker there.

“Before we go in, spit in your mask and rub it around. That’ll keep it from fogging. If you get water in it, tip your head backward, hold the top in, and blow through your nose. It’ll force the water out through the bottom.

“You can forget all I’ve said, and you’ll be okay, but this you absolutely must remember: you have to breathe all the time. As we go down the air

will become denser. As we go up it expands. If you hold your breath going up you can rupture your lungs. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I do."

"The air will shrink in your ears, too. When you feel pressure, push the bottom of the mask up to your nostrils and blow down into it. Do you still want to go?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Are you getting smart with me?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said with a smile.

She smiled back and said, "Okay wise guy, repeat back to me what I just told you."

So he did. She hooked up a tank, had him breathe from it, showed him how to clear his regulator using exhaled air and then doing it with the purge button. Next she showed him how to clear his mask. "Now you do it, Zack," which he did.

"When we get to the water, lean on me with one hand and put a fin on with the other, then I'll do the same. We'll get in when a wave is pulling back. When we're waist deep, get right down on the bottom and ride the current out. Use your fin to kick, and when a wave comes in, use your bare foot as an anchor in the sand and then use it to push toward deeper water when it washes back out. When we get beyond the breakers, we'll put our other fins on. There's a line of rocks out there that are a lobster housing complex. You pay attention to how I catch them. All you'll see will be their antennae sticking out from their holes. You might be tempted to grab one, but don't. They'll just break off.

"When we come back in, and you see me take off a fin, you do likewise. We'll come in hugging the bottom, using the surf to bring us back. When we're in waist deep water again, get your other fin off, stand up and get out quick."

She pointed at a rod running alongside the tank attached to a lever on the valve. "This is a J-Valve. Make sure it's in the up position before you go in. It's

a reserve valve. If it gets hard to breathe, reach back and pull the rod down, and it'll free up the remaining air. We'll be back before that happens, but just in case. Now remember: breathe slow and deep, and never hold your breath."

"Yes, ma'am."

She gave him a mock stern look while sprinkling the beavertails with talcum powder but they were still thick, stiff, and difficult to put on. They donned their weight belts, helped each other into their tank harnesses, picked up their masks and fins, and walked down to the water. Barb had brought along two additional pieces of gear: a four-foot stick with a five-inch round loop of electrical wire fashioned into a slip noose on one end and a red mesh bag with a draw string which she slipped over her arm.

They walked down to the shoreline, completed their preparations and entered the ocean.

THE PACIFIC WAS COLD, but the water trapped between the beavertail and his skin soon heated up keeping him comfortable. The sand was swirling along the bottom making it hard to see. Zack kept alongside Barb, and thought, I'm breathing underwater! This is crazy! As they proceeded deeper, there were single strands of long kelp here and there, growing right up to the surface. Soon it became an immense labyrinth. It looked impenetrable to Zack, but Barb kept her arms in front of her carefully wending her way through the thick stalks, and Zack followed suit.

The bottom was in a state of perpetual flux. The back and forth force of the swells' surge kept the kelp in constant motion. Fishes of all sizes, shapes, and colors busily rushed about through their ever-moving forest home. Crabs walked along the bottom with claws extended defensively out, ready to take on the world. There were enormous neon purple, orange, and yellow multi-legged starfish scattered around the ocean floor. Nothing in his life prepared him for the purity, the primal beauty of life beneath the waves.

Except for the rasp of their regulators this was a quiet world. Their expelled breath formed a myriad of small bubbles, expanding ever larger as

they rose in two shimmering, silvery columns through the blue water on their way to the surface.

All was as it was meant to be down here, unmarked and unsullied by the hands of man, and he found himself strangely at peace. He completely forgot everything else but where he was. It was like he had been here all his life. Gone was the war, gone was the Hawke. Gone. Everything gone but the stunning spectacle that now surrounded him and it was all overwhelming his senses. Zack thought it was like being inside an elaborate cathedral. He had never felt God's loving presence so closely. For him it was truly a religious experience.

AS THEY WENT DEEPER, the colors changed and everything was awash in an unworldly wonderful shade of blue. Barb was poking around in the rocks and beckoned Zack over, pointing to a crevice where a large set of antennae were waving in the current. Drifting to and fro in the surge, she took her noose, and with painstaking slowness began easing it into the nook. The lobster didn't seem too pleased by this development, but neither did he flee. When the loop was behind him, she gently worked it back up over his tail until it was even with his carapace, then with a quick flick of her wrist, she pulled the wire tight. The lobster fought furiously to free itself, swimming in quick circles at the end of her stick, but in the end it did him little good. Barb held fast, pulled in her catch, gripped his back firmly, disengaged him from the snare, and put him in the bag. Even through the round regulator, Zack could see a huge grin light up her face. She made a cute little underwater curtsy, and with a flourish, presented Zack her weapon.

His first attempt was unsuccessful. He moved a bit too fast. His intended dinner guest was having none of it and backed deeper into the rocks. The next candidate was not so fortunate. When they had six in the bag, Barb checked her watch, pointed shoreward, and they began swimming back. Zack thought it was over all too soon.

BACK IN THE SHED Barb asked a smiling Zack, “Well, how did you like it?”

“Oh, Barb, that was great!”

“I knew you were a natural. Some of us are drawn to it. Whenever something’s bothering me, I come here and dive. When I get in the water all my problems slip away. You’re just the same. You’d be surprised at how many people can’t handle it. Most of them freak-out, but you were like a kid in a candy store. If the seas flatten out again, I’ll take you back down before you leave.”

“Thank you, Barb, for this...this gift.”

“Don’t thank me, you needed it. I sense a sadness in you, Zack. Sometimes you kind of drift off, you go somewhere, and I don’t think it’s a good place either. I’m not going to pry. I don’t need to know. The papers are full of the horrible things happening over there, but if I can bring you even a moment of peace, that’s thanks enough for me.

“I told you when you first came, ‘My house is your house,’ and I meant it. When you get back from overseas, if you can find the time, come up here, with or without Bill. Relax, sit on the beach, and get your head together. Let this be your refuge. Give me a call, and if I can sneak away from campus, we’ll go diving again. This war won’t last forever, Zack, and the day will come when you’re going to have to make peace with the past in order to move forward into your future.”

A troubled look swiftly crossed his face, and in that moment he looked to her like an old man carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. Not quite nineteen, she thought bitterly, as she silently cursed President Johnson, and all the other useless, ancient, arrogant politicians sitting safely at home while forcing this senseless war on their own country’s youth. Damn them, damn them all to hell!

She gave him a big hug saying, “Enough of this, Zack, but don’t forget, my house is your house. Now, let’s go cook up some of these.”

BILL AND ZACK'S liberty passed pleasantly. The Holmann clan was half fish, and they were constantly in the water. When not swimming, Zack dozed a lot, and gorged on lobsters. He watched Bill and his friends surf, but resisted their urgings to try it. He agreed with Barb, better to be under the waves than riding them. True to her word, she took him on two more dives, which were every bit as interesting as the first.

ZACK WAS HALF ASLEEP on the back deck when Bill told him, "Hey, Zack, put on your uniform. We're going up to my parents for supper."

An hour later they all piled into the Bronco and drove inland. They gained elevation and the road began curving as they followed the foothills northeast. They came over a rise and the Holmann home was at the bottom. Zack had become accustomed to the sun-bleached, burnt brownish red shades of the California landscape, but the well manicured property surrounding the mansion was a shimmering green. The building, however, was the same flat color as the mountains it sat beneath and that's because it was wholly constructed of bricks. Looking at its enormous size, Zack now understood why they called Barb's place a cottage.

THEY WERE MET at the door by a tall, dark, string-bean of a man in blue jeans, a plaid western shirt and well-worn cowboy boots. He smiled as he shook their hands and Bill introduced him, "Zack, this is Hector. He's allegedly our chauffeur, but he's really dad's right-hand man."

"Pleased to meet you, Hector."

"Pleased to meet you too, Zack." He looked over at Barb and Bill, saying, "Your mom and dad are in the solarium."

They followed him inside. All of the furnishings were noticeably ancient and Zack thought it looked like a museum. They walked through a foyer flanked by two curving staircases and on into a long dining room with a massive oak table that had at least a dozen chairs on each side. Against one wall was an ornately carved hutch that matched the chairs and was the same

length as the table. They kept going and entered a kitchen that was out of keeping with the rest of the place. Everything here was brand new gleaming stainless steel and copper. It had a modern gas range that looked large enough to roast a full grown steer. Off to the side was a scullery area for dirty dishes, and clean up. There was even a walk-in freezer.

Beyond that was a short hall leading to the back of the house where a room about twice the size of the dining room had been added on. It was built entirely of glass and was filled with tropical trees, flowers, and plants. The smell was moist and exotically earthy. Living in a brown world, the Holmanns apparently preferred surrounding themselves with lush greenery. In front of the solarium was a well used living space with comfortable looking chairs and two sofas facing each other. In one corner stood a small wet bar with bottles aplenty and a half-size refrigerator.

The Holmanns stood to greet them. Bill's dad looked like an older, more weather-beaten version of his son, and was dressed similarly to Hector: western plaid shirt with snaps, faded blue jeans, and down at the heels cowboy boots. His mother was a small woman, petite with brunette hair showing a few strands of gray. She had freckles around an upturned nose, wore an amused smile, and was dressed in a denim skirt and lighter denim blouse with a darker embroidered yoke and cuffs. She, too, had on beat-up cowboy boots. Zack thought they all looked like saddle tramps.

"So, this is the Zachariah we've heard so much about!" Bill's dad said, shaking his hand.

His mom simply said, "Welcome to our home." Her hand was small, strong and callused.

Mr. Holmann said, "Sit down and make yourself comfortable. Mi casa es su casa." This time Zack knew what it meant.

Hector asked, "Anybody thirsty?"

Bill's mom had a glass of chardonnay; everyone else took an Anchor Steam beer.

“Bill tells me you come from a small farm in Vermont. We’re farmers, too, although we call ourselves ‘Ranchers’ here in the west, but we don’t do dairy. Our land isn’t productive enough for milk, and that kind of farming takes too much hay and corn. Sounds like a tough row to hoe.”

“Yes, sir. It takes about four tons of hay per cow to get through the winter. We turn them out to pasture in warmer months, and start putting away hay, and corn silage. We make maple syrup in the spring, so we have to cut enough wood to be able to boil, plus we heat with wood too, so summer’s a busy time for us. The days are longer, but sometimes they aren’t long enough.”

“I think I’ll stick with cattle, thank you. Ours are range fed. The conquistadors dropped them off when they first came through here and they were tough enough to live off dried twigs. We want to get back to that. Over the years they’ve mixed with other breeds and aren’t as hardy now. We found pure Spanish stock in Florida and we buy what they’ll let us have. In another generation or so we should have the blood-lines right where we want them.”

“That doesn’t sound a whole lot easier than what we do in Vermont.”

“It probably isn’t but you and I both know ranching always requires hard work. On the other hand, at least we don’t have winter to deal with here.”

Mrs. Holmann asked, “Do you have any brothers or sisters, Zachariah?”

“I have a younger sister, Annie, who’s eleven.”

“I’ll bet she misses you. It must be hard for you being so far away. At least Bill can come back here on long weekends.”

“When I was in Vietnam we were busy at least twenty hours a day, so there wasn’t a whole lot of time to think about it, but sometimes when we were in port I’d get a little homesick.”

“I can only imagine. Fortunately, I’ve never had to be away from home for very long.”

Mr. Holmann asked, “What do you think of the Providence?”

“I think I’m going to be bored out of my skull. There isn’t a lot to do, and I’d rather stay busy. It’s a good place to be though. Bill always calls it the ‘cruise ship.’ ”

Bill chimed in, "It is, and you should thank your lucky stars when you were ordered onboard. You need to get some books or take up a hobby to pass the time. Just don't start playing cards or you'll leave the service in debt to Kohen."

Bill's mom asked, "What are your plans when you get out?"

So Zack told them about Tally and the farm that would be waiting for him.

"Well, Zack," said Mr. Holmann, who had obviously done a little reading prior to Zack's arrival, "Which do you prefer: Holsteins or Jerseys?"

Oh, boy, thought Zack, the endless Vermont debate. They batted that back and forth for a bit, and Mr. Holmann said, "If for any reason your plans don't pan out, you can always work for us. We could use someone like you. Farming is farming. With a little training I'd put you in a manager slot."

"Thanks for the offer, sir, but I sure hope the day never comes when I have to take you up on it. Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"I know it's kind of an oddball question, but I keep wondering about the bricks your house is made out of. It doesn't look like there's much clay around here, and even if there was, it's way too dry to produce anywhere near as many as it took to build this place. I know they're old, but does anyone have any idea where they came from?"

Everyone roared with good natured laughter. Mr. Holmann got up saying, "That's a great question, Zack. There's something I'd like you to see before I answer it."

They all walked back out to the foyer. On the way up the left staircase were four formal portraits. Zack looked at them and thought, why four? Except for the clothes, their faces looked identical. One picture with all their names on it would have worked fine.

Pointing at the various paintings, Mr. Holmann said, "This is my great, great, granddad, Gerd Holmann who started our heritage by buying this ranch. This is my father... and that's his father... and here's my great,

grandfather. I suppose mine'll be up there with them someday. Has Bill told you anything about our family? How we came west?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Now remember: Granddad Gerd's father didn't move here with the rest of our clan. He said he was too old to start over again, but he was a good businessman and lived to a ripe old age. When he died, the brickworks in Belleview had become one of the largest in the state, and several other competing companies were interested in buying it. Granddad put it up for auction with one caveat: whoever won it would have to ship him enough bricks to build the hacienda of his dreams. So in due course money was paid, papers were signed, and as promised, the highest bidder sent the whole load of them out here on the Transcontinental Railroad.

"Granddad never forgot his early days in America; how all the good farmland was already taken, and how we still outdid those who laughed at us. As Michigan prospered, we prospered even more. You see, they needed our bricks to grow. To him, this home was a daily reminder, a shrine if you will, to what a wonderful land of opportunity America is, and we still firmly believe that today. Now let's go see if Maria is ready for us to eat."

They trooped down to the dining room, and took their seats. A short, dark-skinned woman in a western-style dress came out with platters, and piled dishes on the table. When the meal was ready, she and Hector sat with the family.

Mr. Holmann introduced her, "Zachariah, this is Hector's wife, Maria. You're about to discover that she's the best cook in all of California. They're both an important part of this ranch. Their families lived here long before we ever did."

"Pleased to meet you, Maria."

"Pleased to meet you too, Zachariah," she said with a quick smile.

"I hope you're okay with beef. The only thing Barb ever serves is lobster. You must be tired of it by now."

"No, sir. I don't think that'll ever happen."

Barb looked over at him and beamed.
They joined hands, said Grace and dug in

AFTER THE MEAL, they went back to the solarium.

When they were all comfortable, Bill's dad turned to Zack and asked straightforwardly, "What do you think of the war, Zack?"

Zack was sick and tired of talking about it, so he tried to avoid the conversation, "I don't think on it much, sir. I'm just out here doing my duty, and sometimes opinions can get in the way of that."

Mr. Holmann was not so easily diverted. He took note of Zack's reluctance to answer, "I understand you might not want to talk about it, but if it's okay with you, can I give you my take on it instead?"

Zack nodded in assent, so Gerd continued, "Keep in mind that I was on one of the first landing craft to hit Omaha Beach on D-Day. More than half of my platoon was killed right there. In spite of the sacrifices we made, I can tell you without a doubt, World War Two was unavoidable. If our enemies had won, we'd be having this conversation in German or Japanese. This new war is different though. Not only is it unnecessary, it's also a shameful waste of money and lives. If we lose it, I hardly think we'll be speaking Vietnamese. It makes me sick every time I read or hear about one of you guys coming home in a body bag. Fifty years from now no one will remember Vietnam, but the families who lost sons over there sure will. They should give President Johnson and all his fat political cronies rifles and make them do their own dirty work. None of his administration were ever in the service or fought for the Flag. Listen, you two look out for each other, and come back here safe and sound. This war is not worth dying for."

Bill's mom said, "You're right, Gerd, but what I don't like is how the country has turned against you boys in uniform. Holding you personally responsible for this madness is unforgivable. Just remember, we don't all feel that way."

"Thank you, Mrs. Holmann," said Zack.

“It’s high time you started calling me Alice.”

Barb told her mom about the milkshake. She turned pale and said, “Those people need to be horsewhipped and I’d gladly do it myself. This country has gone plumb loco.”

WHEN THE EVENING visit ended they returned to Barb’s. The next morning they packed up and headed out.

Barb gave Zack a big hug saying, “Don’t forget what I told you!”

“I won’t Barb and thank you both so much for everything,” he said shaking Paul’s hand.

Paul replied with an easy smile, “It was truly a pleasure meeting you, Zack. Come back and see us whenever you can, and don’t forget, you are always welcome to visit us at Stanford.”

Zack and Bill got in the Bronco, drove up the two-track to the Pacific Coast Highway and turned south. A week later the Providence steamed out of San Diego Harbor on her way to Vietnam.



CHAPTER 22

12 August 1966

Dear Tally,

You know I don't like to complain about what I can't change, but you asked me to be more open about how things are going on the ship, about how I feel, so from now on, I'm going to try to do that. Tally, I have a problem: I'm really tired of being in the gun mount. I'm tired of its noises, tired of its smells, I'm tired of being jammed up between the two hot breeches, but mostly I'm tired of blowing things up. General Quarters is a joke. It's become a game played by Herrera and the Marine Gun Captain. They actually make bets on which of their crews can fire the fastest. Both of them seem to have lost sight of the fact that our shells don't just kill the VC, but often burn and destroy a lot more than their intended targets. The problem is the Providence fires from too far away. If they ever saw the final results of their handiwork like we did on the Hawke, they might take their jobs more seriously, but then again, knowing those two, probably not. But enough of that, I already feel a little better writing you about it.

Thanks, Tally, for sending our maple syrup to the Holmanns. The professor says his dad was so impressed he wants to make some of his own. What is he going to do, tap palm trees? I shouldn't make fun of him, though. He comes across as all laid back with his worn-out cowboy boots, but he's really one shrewd character. If he tapped his orange groves he'd probably come up with orange syrup, take the nation by storm, make another million and single-handedly replace Vermont's number one, and only exportable product. Pancakes and French Toast would never be the same!

Am so glad, but hardly surprised, to learn you did so well on your Anatomy and Physiology courses. You always say I'm smarter than I think, but the same goes for you. Tally, you are brilliant. You are a diamond and as a nurse, you will shine.

I love you with all my heart, and I miss you more than words can ever say. I love you more than life itself, Tally.

With all my love,
Your Zack

8 December 1966

Dear Tally,

A week ago we steamed into Hong Kong. I was on the helm when the Special Sea Detail was set, and Stevens was late to relieve me. By the time he showed up the Captain and the OOD didn't want to take me off. The currents were wicked, and they worried he might lose the ship's heading while he got the feel for the waters. At the risk of sounding like the professor, all I can say is it was AWESOME! We went through a maze of giant rocks taller than Lake Willoughby's cliffs that pass for islands in this part of the world. Junks of all sizes and ships of all nations were everywhere. Stevens stood behind me. I thought he'd boss me around like he usually does, but he just watched. I don't think I've ever done better. I was like a machine. I just knew what the ship was going to do, and was three steps ahead of it.

When we finally reached our mooring, I saw the Chief Quartermaster, the OOD, and the Captain in a tight little huddle. From time to time, one or the other'd look over at me. I thought I'd done okay, but I began to get nervous. I knew they were talking about me. I thought maybe I had really messed up. Finally Chief Dugan came over, and told me to put in a request to become a Quartermaster.

The Quartermasters provide the helmsmen for critical maneuvering and they want me for the job. It's unusual for someone who hasn't been to QM school to be accepted into the Navigation Division here, but believe me, I'm not complaining.

When I talked to Kohen about it, he had a fit. He tried to talk me out of it. No surprise there as he has a shortage of experienced deck apes. He told me I could make Chief Boatswain if I set my mind to it, but I let him know that wasn't going to happen. I'll be gone before the ink dries on my discharge papers. I'm counting the days until I can come home to you. He finally gave up and signed off on it. Even wished me luck. The funny thing is he assigned the professor to replace me on the helm for regular underway watches, so now we'll be on the bridge together.

I'm kind of stunned by how quick it all happened, but it is official. I'm finally out of that gun mount for good. They're teaching me how to navigate and stand Quartermaster of the Watch, while Stevens is training me to become the ship's Special Sea Detail Helmsman. I can't believe how lucky I am!

Hong Kong was a different kind of city. It has skyscrapers just the same as New York, but they dig the foundations by hand, and the coolies who build them work off of high bamboo scaffolding tied together with rope. This place also has some of the worse slums I've ever seen. The families who live on the junks here have nowhere to go when they aren't seaworthy anymore, so they drag them out of the water and keep living on them in these shanty towns they call 'Squatter's Areas.' There are thousands upon thousands of derelict boats in these sections all within inches of each other.

They have no way to make a living and the squalor and crime is worse than anything you can imagine.

I was sorry to hear of Mr. Hendrickson's heart attack, but selling out to our families was probably the best thing he could do to recover his health. I'm sure he and his wife will have a much easier life in Florida now that they no longer have to deal with winters or work so hard.

It was smart to put a trailer on the land and hire the Thurstons to run it until I get out. They're good, hardworking people who know what they're doing. With dad's oversight that farm will be paying itself off before we ever step so much as a foot on it.

I love you so much, Tally, more than I can ever say, but you just wait. Our day is coming.

With all my love,
Your Zack

22 May 1967

Dear Tally,

Yesterday was a terrible day. We were taking on ammunition from the USS Mars and when we broke away, three of our apes were thrown overboard. We were about six miles offshore and immediately began searching for them. It was a gray day and the seas were running strong with large rolling swells that were just as brown as any of the rivers here from the monsoon rains. We knew from the start we'd never find them, but that didn't stop us from trying. We manned the rails, tripled the lookouts and spent the rest of the day straining our eyes for them, but it was futile. These are deadly waters.

It's real easy to get killed on a ship. Even the smallest mistake can have fatal consequences. We can never lose focus. If we get careless or just look in the wrong direction at the wrong time we can easily be washed over the side. Our ground troops are lucky. They only have one enemy. We have two. It makes no difference whether we are at war or not, because this other

Randy Miller

enemy, the sea, surrounds us and is every bit as vicious and unforgiving as the Viet Cong.

We don't dwell on the danger, but we live with it every day. We know any of us can go overboard any time, and that knowledge makes us more careful, but when pushed to the limits of endurance, bad things can happen, and when they do, the sea and its creatures are always out there waiting to swallow us up. The Navy calls those sailors 'Lost at Sea,' but they're not lost. They're dead. All we can do now is pray for them.

Speaking of prayer, I got your letter from April 21st and think it's great our families are getting along so well, and I was surprised that you have even started going to each other's churches.

It was truly kind of you and your father helping my dad keep the evaporator pans going during maple season. It takes a lot of firewood to make syrup, as you now know. I only wish I could have been there. Thank you so much. That's what keeps me going through this war, that there is still a place in this world where folks are willing to pitch in and help each other.

I was happy to hear the jade necklace I sent you from Hong Kong finally got there, and even happier to hear how much you like it. Think of me when you wear it, Tally.

I'm going to take a short nap. I'm so tired I can hardly stand. I have watch soon, but please pray for our apes and their poor families. Life can be too short. I miss you more than ever, Tally, and never doubt my love for you. I love you with my whole heart, my whole soul, and will forever. I WILL come home to you, and that day can't come soon enough.

With all my love,
Your Zack

12 August 1967

Dear Tally,

Last week we spent four days traveling up the Saigon River. We had to move further inland to hit assigned targets in the interior. This Captain is no

more afraid of shallow water than Captain Foley was. We've got a twenty-foot draft, but he thinks nothing of running through twenty-two foot deep water.

When our eight-inch guns open up, they make the five-inch mounts sound like cap guns, and they're right below the bridge, so we hear them better than we'd like. When they fire, orange flame and black smoke spews out of the barrels for what must be well over a hundred feet. Each and every time the whole ship shudders and shakes from stem to stern like she's being hit by an earthquake, and we've been firing continuously since we've been here.

The Saigon River is part of the Mekong Delta, which is one of the biggest mangrove swamps in the world. It has more channels, rivers, cuts, and back-waters than you can count. While we cruised south all of the vegetation lining the shore was every vivid shade of green, but the minute we got to the Mekong all the colors changed to browns, blacks, and grays. There wasn't so much as a living plant or a living tree to be seen anywhere. Everything was dead, withered, and rotting away. The smell was terrible, worse than rotten eggs. It looked like a haunted forest right out of some frightening fairy tale. The river was running thick, fast, and brown with mud, and was just as lifeless as everything else there.

Usually in the rivers and bays we see hundreds of colorful wading birds, but not in what was left of those mangroves. There was no life to be seen anywhere in them, just decay. The rain was like tears the gray sky was weeping for this wasted place. The Army and Air Force sprayed it with what must have been thousands of gallons of Agent Orange, that defoliant I told you about.

The Cong, who know these waters like the backs of their hands, have been staging ambushes out of here for years. Not now. There's nowhere for them to hide anymore, but it sure does look like a manmade hell.

On a brighter note: we only have another month left here. They're sending us to the San Francisco Navy Yards for some work on the evaporators which have seen better days because of all the muddy monsoon waters that have run through them. While we're there they'll replace all the gun barrels.

Randy Miller

With a little luck it'll take a couple of months. The chief says he'll give me two weeks leave. If I go home I'll lose four days in travel, so why don't you come out here? Barb says we can stay at her beach cottage in Santa Barbara. You'll love it, and the Holmanns are the greatest. I really want you to meet them.

But either way, I just want to see you, Tally, to be with you, to hold you in my arms, to hear your voice, to hold your hand, to feel your sweet kiss, to feel your soft touch, to lay beside you, and feel you breathe, and I'll go to whichever corner of the earth I have to, to make that happen. I love you, and I miss being with you so much, it breaks my heart. I love you more than life itself, Tally, and I count the days until we can finally be together again.

With all my love,
Your Zack



CHAPTER 23

AFTER EXITING THE AIRCRAFT, Tally took a moment at the top of the ramp to scan the small crowd below and, sure enough, there was Zack with a big goofy grin on his face looking right up at her. It was all she could do not to push her way through the descending passengers and run to him. And when she finally reached the tarmac he was waiting there for her, and wrapped her in a huge hug. “Tally, Tally, Tally,” he said in a low husky voice, “It’s been far too long. There’s no way I can tell you how much I’ve missed you.” Tally hugged him back hard, pressed herself into him and whispered in his ear, “I love you, Zack, and I’ve missed you, too. I can hardly believe we’re together again.”

Bill gave them a minute and then said, “Come on you two lovebirds, let’s get your bags. We have beaucoup miles to cover today. By the way, since Zack seems a bit too preoccupied to make any introductions, allow me, I’m Bill Holmann.”

Zack and Tally broke their clinch and Tally smiled at him and said, “I’m Tally Goodwin,” shaking Bill’s hand.

Tally felt a little disconnected. It was early morning and the day before her mother had driven her down to Boston where she boarded a plane to New York, and then caught a red-eye night flight from there to San Francisco. Tally knew she should have slept, but she was too charged up. It had been so long since she'd been with Zack, and the furthest she had ever traveled from Vermont was to visit family in Maine. Now here she was on the opposite side of the country about to see places and things she had only ever seen before in books. But none of that mattered, she reminded herself. She was finally at long last with her Zack and she would make every minute count.

Arms draped around each other, they blindly followed Bill to the baggage claim where he picked up Tally's suitcase and led them away again.

THINGS TURNED UGLY as soon as they left the terminal. There were about forty protesters outside with their anti-war signs. Zack and Bill were in civilian clothing, but that did little to disguise the fact they were in the service. They were of the right age group and physically fit with short hair. Most of the crowd glared at them, but didn't press the issue. After all, it wasn't like there was a shortage of uniforms rushing by for them to vent their ire on. One particularly aggressive individual blocked their way. He had greasy hair down on his shoulders, was unkempt and unwashed. "Hey, you can't trick me," he snarled, "I know you guys are in the military."

He thumped his finger into Bill's chest, and with spittle flying, he yelled loudly for effect, playing to the crowd, "DID YOU KILL ANY BAB...."

And that's as far as he got before Bill's fist connected with the point of his chin. While he staggered back pressing both hands against his bleeding mouth, Zack let go of Tally, smiled at her apologetically and quickly swept the lout's feet out from under him while shoving him to the ground. In the normal course of events, they wouldn't have stopped there, but they were with Tally, a lady, and Zack and Bill were on their best behavior.

The protesters were gathering, pointing, and glowering at them. Some began taking care of their wounded comrade who was now spitting blood,

and bits of broken teeth. Others began waving their arms and shouting, "Police!" More of them picked up the cry. They reminded Bill of the crowds with torches and assorted farm implements that chased Boris Karloff around in the old Frankenstein movies. He knew things could turn bad here real fast.

"Come on kids, let's boogie!" and he put the suitcase on his head as he began running toward the parking lot with Zack and Tally following closely on his heels.

OF COURSE THERE was no pursuit. The mob was far too stoned to give chase. Besides, when one of their members got punched out for crossing the line of propriety, it only reinforced their zealously warped views on just how dangerous to society these fascist military killers were.

THANK GOD MOM made me wear these sensible shoes, thought Tally, and she began giggling as she ran past all the parked cars; more parked cars than she had ever seen in her life. The others heard her laughing, and they cracked up too. When they reached the Bronco, Bill put down her suitcase, and said formally with a little mocking bow, "Welcome to San Francisco, my lady, the friendly city!"

And that set them off again. Weak from merriment, they finally stowed her bag and all climbed into the front seat.

Tally asked, "How long a trip is it, Bill?"

"It's a ways. It'll take us until dusk or so, but today you're going to see some of the most incredible coastline in the world."

"I can't even imagine, but before we get started, can you find a filling station where I can change out of this dress?"

He did, and she came back wearing a pair of old jeans and a red gingham sleeveless blouse. She had elected to keep her sensible shoes on. With these two, she had learned, she needed to be ready for anything!

They settled in for the long ride. Bill drove the whole way. He was familiar with the roads, many of which were in bad shape or just plain

dangerous because of the sheer, unprotected drop-offs down to the rocky Pacific far below.

Tally nestled into Zack's side and he kept an arm around her like he'd never let her go. They were all comfortable with each other and passed the time in companionable conversation. Bill talked about his family, giving Tally the cast of characters of those she would soon meet. Tally talked of nursing school. She was doing her clinical rotation, and was sure she would get a job offer soon on the medical/surgical ward at the hospital in St. Johnsbury. Tally gave Zack an update on his family's activities, for the two families had grown very close and of course, they talked about their new farm.

THE RED SUN was about halfway below the purple and orange streaked horizon when Bill wearily turned down the two-track to Barb's cottage. When they pulled up Tally thought it looked like something out of a children's story book. The enormity of the place spooked her. It was the biggest house she had ever seen. What kind of people lived like this? How can a country girl like me fit in here? She looked over at Zack, not saying anything, but he noticed the worried expression on her face, and squeezed her hand reassuringly. He whispered in her ear, "It'll be all right, Tally. It shook me up the first time, too. The Holmanns are good folks, they're down-home people. There's nothing for you to worry about here. Everything'll be fine."

They looked into each other's eyes and in that very moment they both knew they couldn't have been any further away from Vermont, even if they were on the moon, and yet Tally was reassured, and felt secure in Zack's love. She knew he was right. Everything would turn out fine.

THERE WERE SEVERAL cars parked, and the lights were on in the cottage. Before they reached the door, Barb, Paul, and the Holmann seniors came out. Hugs, handshakes, introductions, and greetings were exchanged all around and then they went in.

BARB LATCHED ONTO Tally and her suitcase the minute they were inside and took her upstairs to Zack's room. She put the bag on a stand in the corner and said with a warm smile, "I'm so glad you're here, Tally. I know what a trying time this has been for you both with this terrible war dividing our country and keeping you two apart. It's so wonderful that you can finally be together again. You know, after Zack came here the first time we couldn't help but love him, and once we saw how badly he missed you and his home, we took him under our wing and ended up adopting him. And since Zack is our brother, that makes you our sister, and as my sister, "Mi casa es su casa."

Tally knew what it meant. Zack had told her.

"Oh, Barb, Zack said you were like this, but when I saw your house I got really nervous. I've never seen anything so grand and didn't know what to expect. I had no idea you'd be so down-to-earth."

"Don't you worry, Tally. We aren't any different than you or Zack. I'm going to let you in on a secret. One we like to keep under wraps. My family has always considered it a duty to help those in need. We also endow quite a few universities, hospitals, and cancer research centers. This year we're branching out into children's charities. We want to make this a better world for everyone, and I know you do too. Otherwise you wouldn't have chosen to enter the medical field. So you see, you and I have a lot in common. Now freshen up. Come downstairs whenever you're ready, and if you need anything at all, just ask."

Barb began to leave. At the doorway she turned and said, "Do you have any idea how much he loves you?"

Tally managed to nod.

"I have to tell you; it's not unusual to see single women walking along the beach here. Some are quite beautiful. Those who stopped to chat with Zack quickly discovered he wasn't interested. Now that I've met you, I can see why." She walked back over and embraced her, saying, "Thank you for coming, Tally. I'm so happy for you both."

Tally hugged her back, “Thank you, Barb. Thank you so much for making me feel right at home.”

TALLY FOLLOWED THE voices into the kitchen where everyone sat around an enormous oval oak table. The men stood as she entered. Barb said, “Let’s go out on the back deck and get some fresh air. We’ll be eating in a little bit, Tally. Dad’s having something brought over.”

It was Tally’s first time to get a good look at Mr. and Mrs. Holmann. They weren’t dressed a whole lot different than she was: faded jeans and western shirts. Both looked like they could use a new pair of cowboy boots, and wait...no, it couldn’t be, but it was! There was cow manure on both of their boots! Tally couldn’t get over it. Two of the richest people in California, maybe even the entire United States, and they looked like a couple of down-on-their-luck cowboys!

Gerd gave her a crooked smile, like he knew what she was thinking, and said, “Come sit with us. A night like this is timeless.”

The Holmanns sat in lawn chairs, and Tally and Zack faced them sitting sideways on a chaise lounge.

Alice said, “Gerd and I have lived here all our lives, but there are some things we never tire of, like the sounds of the sea, or the feel of the ocean breeze. Tell us what you love about your home, Tally.”

Tally thought for a minute and replied, “I love our four seasons. They cause a certain rhythm of life that somehow sharpens us and demands our best.”

Alice asked, “What about you, Zack?”

“That’s easy,” he said wrapping an arm around Tally, “She’s sitting right here beside me.”

They all laughed, but Tally reached up and took his hand in hers, and felt herself flush from the top of her scalp all the way down to her toes.

BARBECUED BEEF and a variety of home grown fruits and vegetables were served for supper. It was all washed down with generous amounts of

Gerd's newly released Chardonnay, which they all agreed was wonderful. Tally thought it was the best meal she ever had. After Hector and Maria cleaned up, Barb shooed everyone out of the house, and Zack and Tally were finally alone.

"COME WITH ME, Tally," Zack said, and led her down to the beach. He remembered being here before with another girl, wishing she was Tally. His wish had finally come true tonight, and he couldn't have been any happier.

Tally's body was tingling. The smell and sounds of the ocean's waves crashing onto the beach, coupled with Zack's close presence were heightening sensations she had never felt so intensely. The stars overhead were twinkling brightly and a Cheshire-cat moon smiled down upon them. Walking through the sand, the warm wind blowing through her hair and Zack's powerful arm around her shoulders made her feel more alive than ever before. She was on fire. She was burning up and she wanted him with every fiber of her being: with her heart, mind, body, and soul, and she wanted him now. Nothing else mattered. She took Zack's hand and led him back to the deck where she quickly threw some furniture cushions down and then pressed herself into him for a long, hot kiss. As she melted and flowed around him, she knew he was every bit as inflamed as she was.

"Welcome home, Zack," she whispered softly in his ear.

"You are my home, Tally, I love you."

"I love you too, Zack. I always will."

And when they came together, the rewards for their love and fidelity were made manifest to them by a loving God as they lay together under His moon and stars, with His waves booming onto the sands of His beach, and at long last they once again became of one body and one spirit.

IN THE MORNING when they awakened, Tally realized something had caught her attention the night before, but she'd blown it off. As she ran her hand down Zack's right arm, she remembered what it was. Her nursing

instincts kicked into high gear. There were several small lumps under the skin of both his arms. She asked, "What are these? Have you had them long?"

"Funny you should mention it. I only noticed them a week or two ago."

"Promise me you'll get them checked out when you get back to your ship."

"They're probably nothing, but I promise, Tally."

"Make sure and write me what they tell you about them. You have an almost nurse for an almost wife."

Zack rolled over and wrapped her in a tight embrace. One thing soon lead to another, and for the time being, the lumps were forgotten.

THEY SPENT THEIR time together in the surf, walking the beach, making love, and enjoying the unbridled freedom of just being together. Various Holmanns came in and out of their lives. Dinner invitations were given and accepted. Tally spent time with Alice and Barb; kind and loving friendships were forged between the three women. Much to Zack's delight, Tally went native in her dress, wearing a bikini full time, with a T-shirt thrown on for good measure. The weather was perfect, and when the seas were flat enough for Barb, she took them diving, but never together, for she knew they were like little children in the water and she needed to keep a sharp eye on them. They took a fair share of lobsters, and between those, and Gerd's beef, they ate like kings and queens.

The time flew by. Two days before Tally had to go back, Bill gave Zack the keys to the Bronco and told them both, "Rather than taking you to the airport, we think you'd have more fun driving without a chaperone. Maria will put together an ice chest tomorrow morning. Here's a road map and directions. It isn't hard. It's pretty much Highway 1, and 101 all the way. Not nearly so bad as L.A., Zack," he said with a chuckle. "Mom made reservations for you at a little beach-side motel she uses about halfway up in Cambria. It's a going away present for Tally. Instructions are with the directions. When you get finished at the airport, just put the car in the

off-base parking lot.” He then snatched Tally right up off the ground with a big bear hug, spun her around in a full circle saying, “You take care of yourself, Tally, and be safe. Zack is sure one lucky guy!” As he set her back down he said, “Oh, and mom wants you to call her collect when you get to Boston, just so she knows you’re okay.

He turned to Zack laughing and said, “I’ll see you on the boat, Bro,” and then he was gone.

Tally was blushing deeper than Captain Foley ever had. Zack saw it, and they both cracked up.

THEY LOADED UP the Bronco and got an early start. Having been raised on the mountainous roads of Vermont, the ride wasn’t as big a deal for them as Bill thought it would be. They switched out driving, stopped frequently, and worked their way through Maria’s ice-chest. They had all the time in the world. Two days to travel three-hundred-thirty miles.

As the sun began to set, they closed in on Cambria. The map took them down a narrow paved road toward the sea. It wasn’t much wider than Barb’s two-track. At its end was the “Little Beach-Side Motel.” The first thing that caught their eye was the splendor of the landscaping. Plants and shrubs in every shade and color of nature’s palette were everywhere. The second thing they noticed was the building itself. It was low and sprawling. It seemed to mimic the beach it was built upon in both color and form. It was of traditional Spanish construction, with heavy dark beams showing here and there through the adobe covered walls. Its roof was made of heavy red tile. The front was brightly lit with multi-colored lights.

When Tally pulled in they were immediately greeted by two bellhops, one of whom said, “Mr. and Mrs. Martin? We’ve been expecting you, please leave your keys in the car. We’ll park it for you. Are these your bags? Good. Please come with us.”

They were whisked away to a large, airy apartment. In the back was a room containing an enormous overstuffed bed with sliding glass doors that

led out to a furnished deck surrounded by thick vegetation, and then down to the beach. Branches and flowering vines stretched overhead connecting both sides. From the back doors it was like looking at the sea through a long green flower specked tube. The bellhop said with something close to reverence in his voice, "Mrs. Holmann said you would be hungry. We have been ordered to serve you here in your suite. It is being prepared now."

The door burst open and they were suddenly besieged by a small army of bustling white uniformed chefs. A buffet of side dishes, meats and seafood, both hot and chilled, was efficiently spread out on the table. Completing it all was a bucket of iced champagne and a dessert tray. If they stayed a month they wouldn't be able to finish it.

When all was made ready, the bellhop continued: "We have been instructed to make your stay here a memorable one. My name is Roberto, and should you require anything, call the desk and ask for me. Now, do you need anything else? No? Good. We have also been instructed to give you complete privacy. Our beach is yours alone tonight. Please convey my thanks and respect to Mrs. Holmann."

Zack and Tally were hungry, but not for the food on the table. As soon as Roberto left they fell onto the soft bed, all arms and legs and bodies tangled up tightly.

Their emotions were subdued, but they were not sad. They knew they must part the next day, but they also knew Zack had only one year of service left, so they made a party of it. Their goal was in sight and it was attainable. They made the night one of celebration, of love making, not of leave taking. Their only interruptions were calls to Roberto for more bottles of his wonderful champagne. They just couldn't get enough of it. Or each other.

THE NEXT MORNING'S JOURNEY took them along a section of the coast known as Big Sur, a wild and desolate place where straight-faced cliffs met the crashing surf of the endless Pacific. There wasn't a lot of access to the water, but every time they could, they stopped, strolled the windswept

rocky beaches, snacked from their Roberto refilled ice-chest, and then they made love for the last time. Tally had gotten into the habit of picking things up off the shore, little keepsakes to remind her of special places: bits of water smoothed colored glass, shells, pebbles, and rocks. She had accumulated so many of them, piece by piece, that Zack was worried her plane would be too heavy to take off.

Once the road came out in Monterey, the whole nature of the trip changed. The highways became congested, not as bad as L.A., but certainly worse than St. Johnsbury, Vermont. There wasn't a ship or mountain road Zack couldn't handle, but the thick traffic, and inconsiderate drivers of California were something he'd never get used to.

AS THEY WALKED up to the doors of the airport, Zack scanned the faces of the protesters, and was glad to see their loud mouthed friend wasn't amongst them. This time though, a uniformed cop was watching, who gave him a friendly nod and smile of solidarity.

IN THE WAITING ROOM, Zack and Tally kept things light and tinged with humor, and after their last kiss, Tally boarded her flight and they both felt like their hearts had been torn in two. Oh Lord, they both silently prayed, help us through the trials and tribulations of the coming year. Let our love strengthen in the face of our adversities, and please, Lord Jesus, please keep my sweetheart safe.



CHAPTER 24

13 December 1967

Dear Tally,

We finally got hit. We've been assigned to 'Operation Sea Dragon' with about a half-dozen destroyers under our command. They have taken our muzzles and leashes off. We are blowing up everything north of the DMZ: bridges, barracks, railroads, and mostly logistical junks. 'Operation Market Time' just wasn't stopping enough supplies from getting through, so now we are bringing the war right to the Viet Cong's front door. It appears to be working because they're madder than hell. Now our Captain sends in the tin cans to draw enemy fire, and when they do, we get a bead on their artillery emplacements and take them out with our eight-inch guns. It's usually a good strategy, but not always. So far they have blasted about a dozen destroyers, and now us.

It's all a bit crazy. We go in zigzagging as fast as we can while shelling them. Of course they return fire but mostly they miss and just splash the sides of our ship. It definitely keeps us focused. This time they managed to

lob three projectiles into the aft 01 deck. Even though no one was killed, five sailors were wounded, a couple of them pretty bad and had to be flown out by chopper. So now we are on our way to Yokosuka, Japan for repairs, which is fine with me.

Don't be worrying. We're a lot better at it than they are, but every once in a while anybody can get lucky. Just look at me and you! I couldn't have gotten any luckier. I just wanted you to know I'm all right in case they decide to report it in the papers for a change, and we'll be off the gun line until the damage is patched up.

I keep going over every minute, every second of our time together on that last leave. It strengthens me. It keeps me going through all this madness. I know this will come to an end, and we will have our beginning, but it can't happen soon enough for me. I love you, Tally, and look forward to that day with my whole heart.

With all my love,
Your Zack

3 February 1968

Dear Tally,

I'm sorry it's been such a long time since I've written. Believe it or not, we're in North Korea now. So much has happened, and I've been kept too busy to write. I will tell you this though: I never stop thinking of you. We did end up going to Yokosuka as planned, and it sure is cold there. Not Vermont cold but cold enough since I'm used to the hundred-plus degree weather in 'Nam. As we approached Japan, the first thing we saw was Mount Fuji, a perfectly cone-shaped mountain that was covered in snow. First time I've seen any of that in over three years. So we went from T-shirts to peacoats in a week. Heavy wool is warm, but the problem here is the cold wind blows right through it and we still freeze.

Anyway, on the 23rd of January, Bill and I were sitting in a bar when the shore patrol came in, blocked the door, and shouted, 'Listen up, return

to your ships at once!' Bill asked them what was going on, but they didn't know any more than we did. They said they were just passing the word, so we hightailed it back.

Onboard all preparations were being made to get underway. We figured there was some crisis back in 'Nam but the next morning, the chief had us correct all of our charts for North Korea. On the 25th we got underway, heading north. We traveled up the eastern coast of Honshu to reach the Hokkaido Passage, and once we got above Tokyo, the shoreline was as rugged and rural as Vermont. Lots of forests, and steep, rocky snow covered mountains. Once through the passage we set a westerly course for Wonson Harbor in North Korea.

We moved fast and two days later we were on station here. By then we knew what was going on. The North Koreans had highjacked one of our ships, the USS Pueblo, and taken her crew prisoner. We thought we were sent to take her back, but so far it's not happening. We have an aircraft carrier and more destroyers with us than you can shake a stick at. We are close enough to make out the individual buildings in the town, but they will not turn us loose. We could blow this place up and the Communists would be begging to give that crew back. We could be done and gone in hours. Meanwhile our sailors are being tortured every day.

There isn't a man in this whole Task Force who doesn't despise President Johnson for the coward he is. It's not the North Koreans beating on the Pueblo's crew, but Johnson himself because he has the power to stop it and refuses to act. When I joined the Navy, I thought our leaders always tried to do the right thing. I no longer believe that. It's like the words in *Amazing Grace*, "I once was blind, but now I see," and what I now see is a bunch of self-serving greedy politicians with no morality whatsoever. You can be sure if it was them or their families getting whipped on they'd order us to do something about it real quick. Everyday everyone of us gets a little madder, a little more frustrated. Why bother sending all these ships here if they won't use them?

So we just go around in circles in these frigid waters, watching and awaiting orders that don't seem to be forthcoming. The weather is usually squally here, with choppy seas, and it snows a lot, making UNREP difficult because of icy decks and equipment. The deck apes have been warned: the water temp is thirty-five degrees. If any of them go over the side, they're gone. The ship won't spend a lot of time looking for them. We had a good laugh about that. What else is new? Warm water, cold water; there's no difference, you go in, you're dead.

I was so glad to hear you got the job down in St. Johnsbury. I never had a doubt. You're going to make a fine nurse! Speaking of medical stuff, I had those lumps checked out. A third-class corpsman took a look and said they were no big deal. Some others onboard seem to have them as well. He called them 'Fatty lumps,' and cut them out, so don't worry, I'm as good as new. I'm going to sign off, and get some sleep in my nice warm rack. I love you with all my heart, and miss you more than I can say.

With all my love,
Your Zack

7 March 1968

Dear Tally,

We are back in 'Nam. They need all of the guns they can get here real bad, so they're bringing in ships from all over. On January 30th, the VC started a countrywide battle to take over the south, and because it began on the Vietnamese New Year, it's being called the 'Tet Offensive.' I've never seen anything like it and pray I never will again. I can't believe people can do this to each other. We are offshore from a town called Hue with another cruiser and six destroyers. Our gunners have been firing over a thousand rounds every single day. We no longer go alongside ammo ships. It takes too long. Now they resupply us by helicopter. As quick as they bring it, we shoot it. Our guns never sleep. We don't even stop while the choppers offload. It's Armageddon.

Last night I was on the bridge and there are no words to describe how God awful the carnage was. We were only a couple of miles off the beach, and all the mounts were thumping out round after round. The sounds were horrific. Every time a shell leaves the barrel, it not only explodes out with huge flames and an enormous boom, but it screams like a Banshee as it cuts through the air seeking its prey. I can only imagine what it sounds like to those who will hear it as their last living sound on earth.

I could see the red tracer fire raining down in continuous streams from our choppers, and the Cong's return arcs of green tracer fire shooting skyward through the pitch-blackness of the night. There were more gunships over the thick jungle than I could count. From time to time I'd see that green fire hit those helicopters and saw their lights wobble. Then with a bright flash, I saw them either explode in the air or when they crashed into the ground. The jungle was alight with the random fires of detonated ordnance and destroyed choppers. It was a vision straight from hell. You know the funny part? The whole time all I could hear was your wonderful voice singing that incredible song, "What the world needs now is love, sweet love," and it broke my heart. There are no acts of random kindness in this land, only acts of random violence. What little love that can be found here is rewarded with death, and hate is rewarded with life. Everything is backwards in this hellhole.

Bill talks about the Buddhist principal of Karma, in which your every action is assessed and assigned a value, either good or bad, which then determines your future. I can't help feeling we are accumulating some real bad Karma here. All of us.

Meanwhile, the ship buckles and groans with every outgoing round. I've been here too long, seen too much of it. As I witnessed this freakish light show of death, for a moment, just for a moment, I thought I could see the souls of the dead flying skyward, like sparks from a fire, both ours and the Viet Cong's, and unlike the tracers, all of the souls were the same color.

Pray for them, pray for me, pray for both this poor country, and ours,

too. I love you, Tally, your love is the only thing keeping me going, keeping me sane here. After you've seen and lived with so much death, it's easy to reach a place where you no longer care if you live or die and actually death begins to look like an attractive alternative to the hell on earth that life can be in war. I miss you so much.

With all my love,
Your Zack



CHAPTER 25

ZACK WAS SCRAPING and wire brushing the port wing. It was unbearably hot and humid as it always was in Subic Bay in July. The chief popped out. “How’s it coming along, Martin?”

“Not bad, Chief. I should have it done tomorrow.”

“All right then, carry on.”

The chief always needed grunt labor. His other QMs had been to navigational school. Most had some college and thought this kind of work was beneath them. When they had to paint, they screwed it up and made a complete mess of it, and of course they whined loudly the whole time. On the other hand, Zack’s few years nestled in the bosom of the Deck Force had accustomed him to strenuous labor. He never complained but often wore a look of tolerant amusement around the others. He tried to hide it, but the chief knew he, like most Boatswain’s Mates, respected the QMs for their knowledge, but regarded them as bunch of wussies.

Zack was progressing well with navigation. Lord knows he was far from stupid, but that wasn’t why he was up here. Zack was the chief’s idiot savant

of the helm. He was brilliant. When they went alongside other ships, his anticipation of the currents was uncanny. When given a course, he went to it quickly and the ship never deviated. Never. Even Stevens, who was somewhat of a prima donna, admitted that Martin was already better than he had ever been. His handling of the ship entering Hong Kong had been so superb, even the Captain had taken note and ordered him on the spot to take Zack into his division. Initially he had been a little resentful, but it was turning out better than expected. His other QMs were happy too, because Martin cheerfully did all the jobs they loathed, but rather than being thankful, with the exception of Stevens, they all treated him with disdain.

The Messenger of the Watch found Zack. "You Martin?" he asked.

Zack nodded. "Ayup."

"You got a visitor on the quarterdeck."

ZACK walked into the chart house where the QMs were drinking coffee and discussing celestial navigation. Except for the chief, they were all dressed in their usual unblemished starched and ironed dungarees. "Someone wants to see me on the quarterdeck, Chief. Can I go?"

"Okay, but don't stay too long, I want that bare metal primed today."

DOWN ON THE FANTAIL, bigger than life, was Zack's old pal, Michael J. Howell. "Hey, Howell," Zack said with a grin. He immediately noticed his friend was wearing a third class signalman's patch.

"Hey, Martin. We just got into port. There's something I want to talk to you about and I know it's still working hours. Can you meet me at the Enlisted Men's Club tonight around supper time?" Howell noticed Zack was wearing dirty, sweat-stained, paint-flecked dungarees, and assumed he was still an ape.

"Sounds good to me, I don't have the duty."

"Okay then. See you tonight," and they shook hands.

ZACK AMBLED OVER to the EM Club and found Howell drinking a Hamms beer at the long mahogany bar, took a stool next to him, ordered one for himself, and said, "I see you escaped the clutches of First Division."

"Yup, Chief McCoy wasn't all that happy about it, but he finally let me go. I see you're still an ape though."

"Nah. I'm in the Navigation Division. They made me the ship's Special Sea Detail Helmsman, but aside from that, I might just as well be a deck ape. The other QMs don't know the difference between a scraper and a wire brush, and when they get a drop of paint on themselves, you'd think it was the end of the world the way they blubber and carry on. So, the chief makes me do all the deck apely stuff, which is okay with me, and I don't hear any of the rest of 'em complaining."

"Ahh, you're the Providence's Palmer?"

"I don't know about that, but I'm a fair hand at it anyway."

"I thought there was something different about you...now I got it. What happened to your accent?"

"I left it on the Hawke. What's up Michael J?"

Howell gave him a slightly puzzled look but continued, "Do you remember Kearns?"

"Sure I do. I've always wondered what happened to him."

"They captured him, that's what. He's in the brig."

"No shit?!"

"No shit. I went over there, and they'll let us in to see him tomorrow at 1700. You want to come?"

"You'd better believe it. I'll have to clear it with my chief first, but he'll let me off early or I'll threaten to go on strike, which'll put the fear of God in them all. Let's meet here at 1600."

"Sounds like a plan."

THE BRIG was a gray and squat concrete fortress surrounded by a thick concertina wire fence. It was immaculate, and why wouldn't it be when

prisoners awaiting court-martial scrubbed every square inch of it daily? There were Marines everywhere. Clearly this was enemy territory.

As they approached it, Zack and Michael J became more than a bit paranoid. “If any of those jarheads recognize us, we ain’t coming out of there alive,” Howell said under his breath.

“We best hope all of the ones from the Kat been transferred out of here, or we are definitely in some deep shit,” Zack whispered back.

At the massive grated iron gate, one of the guards told them, “Up against the wall with both hands and spread your legs.”

“What’s this all about?” asked Zack.

“Just making sure you’re not bringing in any guns, knives, files, or dope.”

They did as instructed, were thoroughly frisked and then the gate was opened for them. In the courtyard were twenty or so prisoners who had been working outside the brig. They were lying belly down on the ground with their arms outstretched. Their uniforms were filthy from their long day of labor and two guards were checking them over for contraband.

Zack whispered to Mike, “This place should have a sign over it, ‘Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.’ ”

Howell muttered back, “Or ‘Work shall set you free.’ ”

They walked around the prisoners, and were brought inside to a small interview room containing three folding metal chairs, and a small table with an ashtray. It was as hot as a blast furnace. The Marine said, “The smoking lamp is lit.” Shortly thereafter they brought in the unfortunate Kearns.

Kearns was thinner than they remembered, and brown as a berry. The jarheads had shaved his head and face down to the bone and they could see by the contrasting whiteness of his newly exposed skin that he had recently worn long hair and a beard. They all fired up cigarettes.

Howell asked, “How they treating you, Kearns?”

Kearns smiled, “Like shit. How do you think?”

Zack wanted to know: “How’d they snag you? I thought you were far enough back in the boonies where we’d never see you again.”

“That’s what I thought, too,” Kearns said ruefully, “But all good things must come to an end. The funny thing is I was getting ready to come back and face the music. I was tired of looking over my shoulder. It’s a long way away, but I knew they’d come for me sooner or later. I married Liezel, and we have a baby. A little girl. She’s two now. Her family took me right in, gave us a house. A hut actually, but you don’t need much there. I worked for her dad fishing, and I learned the language.

“Last week we were getting ready to put the boat in the surf, when two burly ONI investigators sort of materialized on the beach, grabbed ahold of me, and said, ‘Well, lookie here, if it isn’t the elusive Kearns. We been searching all over the PI for you.’ My heart went right down to my stomach. It’s worse if you’re caught instead of turning yourself in, but the cops weren’t bad guys at all. They kind of treated the whole thing like it amused them. Told me I had been a real challenge. I asked if I could say good bye to my wife and daughter and they said okay. It was too late to leave the island anyway. Liezel’s dad invited them to stay for supper, and they kicked it over between themselves a bit, and finally said, sure, why not?

“The family put out quite a spread. Fish, crab, cassava, breadfruit, everything they had, all washed down with plenty of San Miguels. When it got late, Liezel started crying, and I asked if I could go home and spend the night with her. They had another argument, but one said to the other, ‘Where the hell can he run to?’ In the end, they made me promise I wouldn’t take off, and they let me. Not bad guys at all. One said, ‘Hell Kearns, you got it made here. This is paradise. Makes me want to go over the hill too. Does your old lady have any sisters? I could get used to this, mosh skosh.’

“The next morning we started the four-day trip back to Subic, and the whole time we drank like fish. They told me so many sailors and Marines were going AWOL that the court-martial boards were having trouble processing them all. Said they used to investigate all sorts of interesting cases, now all they do is hunt down deserters. One case they kept talking about was how a bunch of deck apes from the Black beat the shit out of a bunch

of Marines in the Kit Kat Klub, but they could never prove it. It reminded me of you guys. I remember that, ahhh, problem we had at the Kat, but I kept my mouth shut.

“They seemed really happy to be so far off the beaten path. They acted more like they were on some sort of vacation, with their Hawaiian shirts, shorts and sandals.

“They told me when I eventually get court-martialed they’ll probably give me ‘six, six, and a kick’ which means six months confinement at hard labor, six months busted down to seaman recruit without pay, and a Bad Conduct Discharge. They told me to get my lawyer to fight the BCD. Fall on the mercy of the court citing hardship reasons. Liezel was pregnant, and had my baby. Say it unhinged me. No one wants to break up families, and if you have a BCD, you can’t get a passport. I have to try for a General Discharge under less than honorable conditions so I can get back here to my family.

“Before we got to the gate, they shackled me. When they got me to the brig, one of ‘em said, ‘We don’t like to turn you or any other squids over to the damn jarheads. This is nothing personal, Kearns, we’re just doing our jobs. If it were up to us, we’d a left you right where you were. Remember, fight that BCD.’ So that’s where I am now.”

The conversation turned to gossip about the other Hawke deck apes and then their time was up. They wished him luck and left the hellhole.

ZACK ASKED HOWELL, “It’s early, what do you want to do?”

“How about we stop by the Shangri-La?”

“Kind a like revisiting the scene of the crime?”

“Something like that,” said Mike.

WALKING INTO THE SHANGRI-LA they were surprised to see Chief McCoy sitting at the bar sucking down beers and talking with his retired pal, George Landry. Dalisay saw them first, gave a huge whoop of delight, and hugged them both. It was like old home day. Anela was there

along with some apes from the ship. In short order, Dali chased all of the non Hawke squids out of the bar, closed the curtains, locked the door and said, “We gonna have a party! Alla drinks onna house!”

They spent the evening rehashing the raid on the Kat, and drinking more San Miguels than was prudent. Chief McCoy told Zack, “That raid’s a Hawke legend. We tell all the new apes about it so’s they know deck apes are bad asses and Marines are a bunch of pussy cats. Who the hell else’d hang out in a place called the Kit Kat Klub, anyway?”

“Where’s Palmer now, Chief?”

“He volunteered fer swift boat duty in ‘Nam.”

Both chiefs laughed, and George said, “He almost didn’t gets it. He had a problem or two at survival school. Seems like dey made de students live off de fat of the land in de Mojave Desert, except dere warn’t no fat. Palmer was eatin’ a rattlesnake he caught, when an officer come up and axed him fo’ a piece. He said he was mightily hungry. Palmer told him ta go and catch his own damn supper. When he axed again, Palmer cold-cocked him. Said it was rude ta inarup a man’s meal. Den when dey went trough da part a bein’ captured and interrogated, Palmer beat da shit outa da fake VCs and excaped. No one ever did dat befo’. When dey puts him on de carpet fo’ it, he trew it right back in dere faces sayin’ I just be doin’ what you tole me ta. You said try ta excape, and I did!”

Zack shook his head, “I feel sorry for the real VC when he gets back over there!”

Everyone in the bar roared with laughter. George said, “Here’s ta Palmer!” And they all drank. When they finally quieted down, Chief McCoy asked Zack, “Yew must be gittin’ short, what yew gonta do when yew git out?”

“I’ve got three months left, Chief. I’m going back to farming.”

The chief laughed so hard Zack thought he’d fall off his barstool.

“What’s so funny, Chief?”

“Yew, yew little chikin fucker. Farmin’s jist another word fer slavery. There ain’t a boatswain worth his salt in this Man’s Navy who wasn’t runnin’

from a farm when he joined up. Why'd yew think we stay in fer twenty years? It's so's we don't hafta go back home! But yew, yer runnin' in the wrong direction, boy!" He looked at Zack intently, if maybe a little blearily, and said, "Yew proved us wrong, Martin. We thought yew was one a us, but all the same I wish yew fair winds and followin' seas. Yew waz a right smart ape and good in a fight. Yew'da made a fine boatswain, and I don't say that ta many."

"Thanks, Chief. I don't know what to say."

"Don't say nothin', boy. Jist git yerself on home. If yew work as hard there as yew did here, ya'll do jist fine."

AT THE WITCHING HOUR they said their farewells to George and Dali, then climbed aboard a jitney and headed back to base. At the gates they said their own good byes, some of which would be for the last time, and staggered back to their ships.



CHAPTER 26

6 October 1968

Dear Tally,

It's official. I'm at the transient barracks in San Diego being processed for an Honorable Discharge. I've come full circle. It seems like only yesterday I got out of the taxi here as 'a green-assed boot' and reported aboard the Hawke. I'm happy and sad at the same time. Happy, because soon I'll be with you my love, my almost wife, but sad because I am leaving so many good friends behind. Bill told me after that terrible night at Hue that we're brothers. And you know what, Tally? He's right. We are all brothers. Not just Howell, Chief McCoy and the rest I served with, but everyone who was stationed on any kind of ship in Vietnam. It makes no difference if it was a carrier or a rowboat. We all answered the call, faced danger, did our duty, and served with honor.

Speaking of the professor, He and his father are giving us the Bronco. Gerd says we can always use it for a tractor. Bill's going to have a month's leave coming up toward spring and he and his dad will drive it out and

fly back. They want to see Vermont, and meet our families. I've been coaching Bill on how to talk Vermontese by dropping his R's. He's a little slow, although he does say 'ayup' real good now. Gerd also wants to meet some Jerseys and Holsteins up close, and of course, to see our maple syrup operation.

When I find out my flight info I'll send you a note so you can pick me up in Boston. I'll keep this short, lots to do, and I'll be able to see you, to hold you, and talk to you real soon. I love you more than life itself, Tally, and can hardly wait. I feel like a kid at Christmas!

With all my love,

Your Zack



PART THREE

THE AFTERMATH.
HOW THE VIETNAM WAR
AND THE VETERANS
ADMINISTRATION AFFECTED
THE HEALTH OF ITS NAVAL
VETERANS.

*Most Holy Spirit! Who didst brood
Upon the chaos dark and rude,
And bid its angry tumult cease,
And give, for wild confusion, peace;
Oh, hear us when we cry to Thee,
For those in peril on the sea!*

—The U.S. Navy Hymn



CHAPTER 27

AFTER STEPPING OFF the plane in Boston, Zack wearily told Tally, “I sure hope this is the last time we have to meet in an airport.” She wrapped herself around him and said softly, “We won’t have to anymore, sailor boy. Our long wait is finally over. Our time starts now.”

They picked up his bag from the carousel. In his dress blues with his seabag on his left shoulder and Tally held tightly under his right arm, they made quite a picture as they proceeded to the Falcon. Zack stowed his bag in the trunk, and got in while Tally slid into the driver’s seat. She started the car, pulled out and said, “I have so much to tell you, Zack, I hardly know where to begin. Mom gave us this car so I can get to work. I’m on the first shift. I help prepare people for surgery, and take care of them when they come out. I like it fine, but I’d rather work in intensive care. Have you talked to your father about our farm?”

“I have, Tally. It’s doing real well. Dad says he hardly goes over anymore. Bert knows what he’s doing and is shipping milk like crazy. I want to keep him on if he’ll stay for what we’re paying him now. It’s a big place, and I’m going to need help. What do you think?”

“I think it sounds like a good idea.”

“Good. Why don’t we go right there? It’s on the way. There’s no better time than now to get it done, and I really want to see the place, to see if it really exists. I kept this picture of it, of you too, and all the things I love, in my head, for when things got bad. But the reality doesn’t always match the picture, Tally, like with you.”

Tally frowned, “What do you mean, Zack?”

“You’re a hundred times better,” he said as he put his hand on her knee.

“Zack Martin,” she told him in mock anger, “You can’t sweet talk me, and if you keep that hand on my knee, we just might not make it to Vermont tonight.”

“I don’t have a problem with that, do you?” Neither of them did. They found a motel room and didn’t come up for air until the next morning.

LATER THAT AFTERNOON they reached the two-track leading to their farm. Zack and Tally had reconnected spiritually and physically. To both of them it seemed like they had never been apart. The ride up had been glorious. The foliage was one long riot of colors. The maples looked like they were aflame against the crystalline turquoise sky.

Tally directed Zack to drive past the farmhouse. About a quarter mile beyond they came upon a double-wide mobile home and a yard that was neat as a pin. There was a large pile of cut and split firewood off to the side. It was a clear, cool day, and smoke was drifting up idly from a metalbestos chimney poking through the roof. Parked in front was an old green mud-streaked Dodge Power Wagon.

They had no sooner stopped the car when the front door opened, and Bert and Mavis Thurston came out to greet them. Bert was tall, thick in the shoulders, and had a quiet, thoughtful demeanor. The only time he had ever left Vermont was to fight in the Korean War, and he never wanted to leave again. Mavis was a tiny, bird-like woman, full of energy; they had known the Martins forever.

Mavis grabbed Tally first, and then Zack in a tight hug, saying, “I can’t believe you’ah both finally heah! I’m so happy you made it back in one piece, Zack!”

Bert and Zack shook hands and they all went inside. In the living room, a box stove chased out the cold. They sat at the kitchen table and Mavis served them coffee.

Bert gave Tally a slight smile, and said to Zack in a low, rumbly voice, “Welcome home, Zack. ‘Tis good to see you’ah done with this damn wah.” Shaking his head sadly, he continued, “Vietnam’s been on the TV a lot lately and it reminds me of Korea. Too many killed, and mahk my wohds, no good will come of it.”

“I agree, Bert, but in spite of what we’ve both been through, it’s behind us now and we can move on with our lives.”

“You might find that ain’t always such an easy thing to do, Zack, but as you say, one way owah the othah, we do move on.”

“I may as well just spit it out: if you’re all right with your terms, Tally and I both want you to stay. Dad tells me you’ve done a great job and it’s going to take me a while to pick it up. Besides, I suspect there’s plenty of work for both of us.”

Mavis blurted out, “We was hopin’ you’d say that! We love this place!” And she burst into tears. Tally got up, went over to her, and gave her a hug.

Bert put out his hand, “We gladly accept, Zack”

Zack sighed with relief. Both men shook on it. “That’s settled then. Thank you, Bert.”

“No. Thank you, Zack. Togethah we’ll make this the best fahm in the whole Kingdom.”

Mavis asked, “Will you be spendin’ the night next doowah?”

Tally blushed to the roots of her hair, “What would people think?”

Mavis told her, “Ain’t nobody’s business at all. No one’ll evah heah about it fum us. ‘Tis youah place now and ‘tis too late to leave. Bert, you go ovah theyah, and staht a fiyah. My man filled that woodshed with ten chohds of

split wood, enough to see you through this wintah. Shoo, now Bert, wahn that house up!”

WHEN THEY ENTERED the farmhouse it was cleaner than a hospital. Considering she had always lived on farms, Mavis hated dirt. She had no problem with it, as long as it remained outside. When it came into her bailiwick she attacked it like the Junk Forces attacked the Viet Cong. In the middle of the living room, an antique parlor stove was beginning to glow red. The rest of the house was still cold but that didn't bother Zack or Tally. Nothing could take away the joy of this moment.

“Oh, Zack, I can hardly believe you're really back from the war, and here we are in our own home! I must be dreaming! I just couldn't be any happier!”

“I couldn't either, Tally. I've wished so many times for this day to come, and now that it finally has, being here with you is well worth the endless separations. I love you Tally, and if I had to, I'd wait for you forever. You are that dear to my heart.”

“As you are to mine, my love, as you are to mine,” and she gave him a long, deep kiss.

With that, Zack quietly closed the door behind them, and then they were once again in each other's loving arms.

TWO WEEKS LATER they were wed in the fastest non-shotgun marriage in Vermont. It was a double denominational ceremony. Zack's priest and Tally's minister had agreed in the spirit of ecumenicalism to jointly perform the nuptials. Only close family attended, including Bert and Mavis.

It was a no-nonsense affair celebrated in the Meadow Meeting House, a very old church built by the settlers in the early seventeen-hundreds, right after they moved onto the land. It was one of the few ancient places of worship still standing. Most had burned down because they were heated with wood furnaces, not always in the best of condition. The Meadow Meeting

House was no exception, and Bert, after giving the place a thorough safety inspection, had started a fire in the big potbellied stove the night before.

The white church with its belfry and colorful stained glass windows was locked up now and only used for weddings and funerals. There was a small cemetery adjacent to it with headstones running the gamut from ancient, moss covered marble, marking the places of rest of the original Puritans, to new shiny granite, marking the graves of the most recently deceased.

IT WAS AN Indian Summer day, warm with clear blue skies for that time of year. In the lower valleys the foliage was still brilliant, and in the higher elevations the leaves had already fallen. The distant mountains were gray with unadorned trees, and snow was gleaming on their peaks. Fall wouldn't last much longer, and winter would soon be hard and fast upon the Northeast Kingdom.

The wedding party assembled out front with everyone wearing their Sunday best. Annie was the Maid of Honor. At fifteen she was rapidly changing into a lovely young lady, and wore a dress she had sewn for the occasion. It was white and coral satin with a wide lace collar. The bride wore a beautiful white gown, her long blond hair hung loose under a flowered veil. She was so radiant that she positively glowed. Zack, at the request of both sets of parents, wore his dress blue uniform for what would be the last time. They all thought they had never seen a more handsome groom or a prettier bride.

As Zack formally greeted the Goodwins, Tally's mom said, "No more of this Mr. and Mrs. stuff, Zack, we're family now. This is Aaron and you call me Mom!"

Hands were shaken all around.

THE LAST ARRIVALS were the minister and priest. They drove up together in a beat up 1959 Nash Rambler; church work didn't pay a lot. The priest was wearing a long black cassock with his purple stole draped around his neck, while the minister wore a formal suit.

They quickly ushered everyone inside, and took their positions on the small stage platform with Zack. At a nod from the priest, Tally walked down the aisle with Aaron, who would give his daughter away. They were followed by Annie and the Best Man: her dad. After everyone had taken their places on either side of the reverends the minister said, “We are all gathered here today in the sight of God, to give recognition to the worth and beauty of love, and to add our blessings to the words which shall unite Zack and Tally in Holy Matrimony.”

The priest: “Marriage is a most honorable estate, created and instituted by God, signifying unto us the mystical union, which rests between Christ and the Church; so too may this marriage be adorned by true and abiding love.”

The minister: “Should there be anyone here who has cause why this couple should not be united in marriage, speak now or forever hold your peace....Who is it that brings this woman to this man?”

Aaron answered, “I do.” He placed Tally’s hand on Zack’s.

The priest: “Today you are blessed with God’s greatest of all gifts, the gift of abiding love and devotion between a man and a woman. All present here, and those here in heart, wish both of you all the joy, happiness and success the world has to offer.

“As you travel through life together, I caution you to remember that the true nature of success, the true avenue to joy and peace, is to be found within the love of Jesus Christ.”

The minister: “Within the Bible nothing is of more importance than love. We are told, “God is love.” We are assured, “Love conquers all.” It is love, which brings you here today. It is love that will make this a glorious union and it is love that will cause this union to endure.

“Please face each other and join hands.”

The priest nodded at Zack, who gently held Tally’s small hands firmly in his own, and looked directly and deeply into her eyes. They never wavered. She thought he was looking straight into her soul. He said in a strong, steady voice, “Tally, I promise to love, honor, and protect you, forsaking all others.

I take you to be my wife. To have and to hold, in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, and I promise to love you forever more.”

Tears began flowing down Tally’s cheeks. She had prayed so long and so hard for this day to finally come; the waiting had almost broken her heart, but now it was all worth it, and she couldn’t have been happier. In her heart she was singing her praises to God; Oh, thank You, Lord Jesus, thank You, Thou who art all knowing, Thou who art so great, and so good!

The minister gave her the nod, and she said in a whisper, because had she said it any louder, she would have just broken down and wept tears of pure joy. “Zack, I promise to love, honor, and obey you, forsaking all others. I take you to be my husband...” Her voice caught in her throat... She got it back together and continued, “To have and to hold, in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, and I promise to love you forever more.”

The priest said, “You may now exchange rings.” Tom handed Zack Tally’s and he slipped it onto her finger. Aaron gave Tally Zack’s and she put it on his finger.

The priest said, “Let these rings be a token, a reminder of this day, of your love and devotion to one another.”

Then he turned to the minister, and they said in unison, “In so much that the two of you have agreed to live together in Holy Matrimony, have promised your love for each other by these vows, the giving of rings and the joining of hands, we now pronounce you husband and wife. You may now kiss the bride.”

They embraced with a slow, loving kiss, and those in attendance clapped and cheered!

When everyone quieted down, the minister said, “Please join me in The Lord’s Prayer,” after which, the priest said, “Go in peace.”

After thanking the men of God, everyone got in their cars and drove over to the new Martin Farm for a celebratory pot-luck reception and party that lasted for the rest of the day.

LATER, when everyone had gone home, Zack and Tally went upstairs to their new bedroom, undressed without so much as a single word, climbed into their bed and with love and God's Grace, consecrated and consummated their marriage.

THERE ISN'T A lot to do on a farm in winter. The heavy lifting is done in spring, summer, and fall. Bert had expertly taken care of it all. Hay was stored, silage was in, and wood was cut. Zack and Tally soon fell into a comfortable routine. She had to be at the hospital by seven, so she got up with Zack and helped Mavis cook breakfast while the men milked the cows. Then they all ate together in the Martin's kitchen, and when Tally went to work, Mavis washed the dishes. During the day Zack and Bert fed the herd, cleaned the barn, plowed snow, and once again milked. Thurstons and Martins took their evening meals in their own homes. At supper, Zack and Tally would talk about their days. Afterwards, they'd read or sometimes play cards. They went to bed early, and never tired of making love.

ONE NIGHT, in mid-January, Tally told Zack, "You know, Zack, those growths in your arms seem to be coming back. You should go get them checked out."

"You're right, Tally. Why don't I drop you off tomorrow morning, and I'll run down to the Veterans Administration Hospital in White River Junction?"

"That sounds like a good idea, but I can always put you on my health insurance plan at work."

"If the VA doesn't pan out we can do that, but I got these lumps in Vietnam and the VA is supposed to take care of guys like me who got medical problems while they were on active duty. I better call Bert and give him a heads-up."



CHAPTER 28

IT WAS STILL DARK when Zack and Tally set out. The snowfall was tapering off but had built up on the roads overnight. By Vermont standards it was warm, and before noon it would probably turn to “wintery mix,” a combination of every type of precipitation known to man. They took the two-track over to Route Five, and then cut south toward St. Johnsbury and Tally’s place of employment: the Northeastern Vermont Regional Hospital, better known as “NVRH.” Its catchment area was the entire Kingdom, and it was always a busy place.

On the ride down neither spoke much. They were both troubled, but for different reasons. Tally knew from work that when tumors grew back in the same places on a patient’s body, it could very well be a disease called Soft Tissue Sarcoma. Zack was uneasy because he had an ominous feeling something was badly wrong with him, and if this turned out to be true, he was concerned about how it might affect Tally.

In the hospital parking lot Tally told Zack, “Now make sure you get those lumps biopsied.”

“I will.”

“Okay then, Zack. I love you. Watch out for black ice.”

“I love you too, Tally. I will. I’ll pick you up after work.”

Zack swung the Falcon back out onto the highway heading south. As the crow flies, White River Junction is about sixty miles distant. The road was sloppy with slush, but he was used to these conditions, so he settled in and enjoyed the trip. He followed the frozen Passumpsic River down to the village of Enosburgh Falls where it flowed into the much larger Connecticut River. As the sun began to rise, Zack could see both sides of the broad upper valley through the fading flurries. The sky was overcast with heavy gray storm clouds, and the mountains were colored brown from the barren tree trunks poking out of the snow covered ground. Here and there were bright thick patches of green pines standing out in stark contrast from their leafless neighbors, and the signs, the trees, the houses, the cliffs were all dappled white from the previous night’s blizzard.

As Zack slid his way down the road, he thought it was more like driving a boat or a ship. Anything that moved over water never went in a straight line, and while steering, you had to constantly anticipate and compensate for slippage. Over-correct, and not only would you be off course, but today you may just end up in a ditch or the river. This brought on other thoughts and remembrances of the war. They kind of flickered through his mind like an unedited film. Here again was Do Nuoc, but those kinds of memories didn’t bring on the anxieties they once had. He thought of all his good friends and the good times as well. He passed through McIndoes Falls, Bradford, Fairlee, and Norwich in a kind of pleasant reverie.

Almost two hours later he turned off Route Five to the entrance of the VA hospital, which was a big brick institutional-looking monstrosity built after World War Two. He parked by the main entrance, went in, explained his situation to the volunteer, and was given directions to “Eligibility.”

Zack read an ancient *Look* magazine for a half-hour or so before he was called into the office and took a seat opposite the desk of one John

McEbbons. They introduced themselves, and made some idle chit-chat about the weather, which was always a topic of interest in a state where the temperatures could fluctuate as much as seventy degrees on a winter's day. When the conversation slowed, McEbbons asked, "What can I do for you, Zack?"

"Well, sir, I just got out of the Navy last fall. When I was on the USS Providence, a third class corpsman cut some fatty lumps out of my arms and they've all grown back. Now I have some on my legs, too. Here, look at the scars," Zack said rolling up his sleeves. "My wife's a nurse and she's worried about it, so here I am."

"Here's how it works: my job's to find out if you're eligible for our services. Did you happen to bring a copy of your DD-214?"

"Yes, sir, I did."

"Good. I'm going to need your permission to get your medical records. If it's as you say, we'll take care of you and assign you a disability rating accordingly. You'll get travel pay and some other assistance when you have to come down here. It could take a month to get them but you're clearly a vet, so I'm not going to wait. We'll get you fixed up now and sort out the rest of it later. Go sit in the waiting room and I'll have someone come and get you."

"Thank you, sir."

"It's no big deal. We're all vets taking care of vets here."

ZACK WENT BACK to his Look magazine. A little while later a nurse came in and said, "You Martin?" Zack nodded.

She beckoned, "Come with me."

She took Zack to the surgical wing showing him into an office belonging to Dr. Josh Rosen, an overweight, florid, gray-headed older man.

When introductions were made, he said, "Show me your lumps."

Zack did and the surgeon palpated them gently. "I see from these scars that several appear to have been cut out, but are now growing back. Is that the case?"

“Yes, sir, it is.”

“Well, young fellow, you’re in luck. I had a cancellation today, uh, actually the patient died,” he said with a chuckle, “I’m going to cut them out right here with a local anesthetic.”

“Are you going to biopsy them?”

“Oh, to be sure,” and he leaned into the hallway and called for a nurse.

THREE HOURS LATER they finished taking seven tumors out of his arms and legs.

Dr. Rosen told Zack, “You’re going to be sore for the next ten days or so but you already know that from the first time. Take these pills three times a day for the next three days, then as needed. We’ll give you a call when we get the results of the biopsies, but don’t hold your breath. This is a VA facility, and its wheels grind slowly.”

“Thank you, sir.”

ZACK LEFT the hospital with a sigh of relief. Everyone had been so friendly and they took care of him so fast. Everything would be okay. He had served his country honorably and after today he wouldn’t have to worry about these damn lumps anymore.

Since morning the weather had changed. The snow had stopped, the temperature was plunging, and the sky was the clearest of blues. Zack didn’t need to be told an arctic high was pushing out the low pressure. It would be well below zero tonight, a good time to see the northern lights. As he went through the small town of Bradford, he looked to the New Hampshire side and saw Mt. Moosilauke, one of the tallest of the White Mountains. The sun was glistening off its snow covered peak. What a beautiful sight he thought, those mountains have been here since the beginning of time; and yet how brief are the sparks of our lives.

HE WAS SITTING in the parking lot when Tally walked out of NVRH.

Zack saw her coming, and thought to himself, she's so beautiful, so loving. How could I have ever been so lucky?

When she got in the car Zack explained all that had happened. She was heartened that they had taken care of him so promptly, although she was still worried about his biopsies. She quickly steeled herself, buried her fears as best she could and thought, I won't worry about it until I have to.

Still, it was never far from her mind, or for that matter, Zack's either.

THE PHONE CALL they had been waiting for came nearly a month and a half later. "Is this Zack Martin?"

"Yes, it is."

"This is John McEbbons at the VA."

"Hello, Mr. McEbbons. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I'm afraid we have some unpleasant news for you. You need to come down here as soon as you can."

"Can't you tell me over the phone?"

"I'm afraid not. It's too complicated for that. Just come down when you can."

"Okay, sir."

"Who was that?" asked Tally.

Zack told her. She turned pale.

"Can you come with me?" he asked.

"Count on it, sailor. I have some comp time coming. Let me make some calls and we'll go tomorrow."

THEY WALKED INTO the VA hospital with a sense of dread. When they went to McEbbons' office he hastily ushered them in.

"I'll be with you in a minute. I have to make a call first." He picked up his phone, dialed a number, and said, "This is McEbbons. Zack Martin's with me. Can you make the time to see him when he's finished here.... Yes... okay...I'll send him down."

Zack asked, "What's the problem?"

"The problem is your service medical records don't mention a single word about you ever having any growths or lumps removed. Zip. Nada. Nothing. Didn't you say a third class corpsman performed the procedure?"

"Yes, sir, I did."

"That's what I thought you said, so I asked around. A lot of third class corpsmen do that sort of thing, but they aren't supposed to. The consensus of opinion seems to be that he didn't enter it into your records because he couldn't. If he had, he would have been admitting he was exceeding the authority of his rank."

"How could any of this be my fault?"

"It isn't, but that doesn't change your situation. The VA can't treat you for free because your condition had to have been present while you were on active duty."

"Come on, Mr. McEbbons, you saw the scars."

"I did, Zack, and I know damn well what happened, but you have to understand, there's nothing I can do about it. Everything here is done by the book, but I did do something to help you out. I've gotten you a zero percent disability rating. That means you are eligible for treatment at any VA facility, but the down side is, we can't give you any travel pay or pick up the cost of hotels for you if you require treatment at another VA hospital location. Also, the government will charge you a nominal co-pay amount for your treatment and prescription drugs based on your income."

Zack looked like a deer caught in the headlights. "You mean I have to pay for my doctoring and medicine here?"

"Yes, I'm afraid you do, but it's not as bad as it sounds. If you can't come up with the money, the VA will take it out of you and your wife's tax return at the end of the year. I wish I could have done more for you Zack, but I've done all I can. Now, if you don't mind, I have other people waiting, and the doctor wants to see you right away."

THEY WALKED DOWN the hall in stunned silence.

“Come in, come in,” said Dr. Rosen. “I see you brought your lovely wife. Good.”

After they sat down, he said, “I’m afraid I don’t have much of a bedside manner, if I did, I’d probably be making more money across the river at Dartmouth College, so I’m going to give it to you straight: your biopsies came back malignant. They show that you have a form of cancer called ‘Soft Tissue Sarcoma.’ ”

“I know what it is,” said Tally, “I’m a Registered Nurse.”

“Then you should know that Sarcomas have different diagnosis criterias. Your husband is fortunate because his is a lower grade, or slow growing type. You’re a farmer, right, Zack?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Our jobs are actually quite similar. When your crops grow you harvest them, and that’s precisely what I’m going to do with these tumors. When they grow I’ll harvest them just like I did the last time. Other than that, there’s not a whole lot more I can do for you. Now, before you leave, I want you to get a chest x-ray to make sure your lungs are clear. Tell me this: are you having trouble moving any parts of your body, or are you feeling numbness and tingling anywhere?”

Zack thought it over and said, “Yes, sir, I do. My left arm feels like I hit my funny bone. It’s been that way for the past couple of weeks.”

“Okay. We’ll get that x-rayed too, and don’t forget: I want to see you like clockwork once a month. Stop by the front desk and schedule your next appointment, then go over to the radiology department.”

IN THE CAR Zack told Tally, “I can’t believe this is happening. I feel like some kind of third-class citizen. I did four tours in Vietnam and never shirked a single job and now this is what I get? You heard McEbbons tell me in there that the VA refuses to admit I got this disease while I was in the service, even after he’s seen my scars. Where else could I have gotten

it? Now he says we have to pay for travel and co-pays? Heck, Tally, it takes the better part of a tank of gas to get down here and back, and I can't even begin to guess how much they're going to charge me to see Dr. Rosen every month. I...I really don't see how we're going to be able to come up with enough money to pay for it all."

She scooted over next to him putting her head on his shoulder and her hand on his leg, saying, "Don't you worry about it, Zack, don't you worry. I'll put you on my medical insurance policy at work, and it'll be okay. I married you in 'sickness and in health,' don't you remember? Don't you remember, Zack, my love? We'll get through this. I love you, and our love is all that matters in the whole, wide world. At least we know what those tumors are now, so we can face this disease together and fight it head-on."

"You're the best there is, Tally. No wonder I love you so much."

She squeezed his leg, and turned her head into him so he wouldn't see her silent tears.



CHAPTER 29

ON AN OVERCAST DAY, with clouds spitting snow in mid-April, a blue and white Ford Bronco, showing more mud than paint, pulled up in front of the Martin's home. Gerd and Bill got out and stretched. The farmhouse door flew open and Tally came running out. She hugged them both fiercely and began to cry. Both men were alarmed and Gerd asked, "Tally, what's the matter?"

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, where are my manners? Let's get out of the cold and I'll explain." She brought the Holmanns into the house and sat them down at the kitchen table by the warm, wood burning cook stove. While they made themselves comfortable, she quickly set out a plate of cookies and put on a pot of coffee. After she took a seat herself, Gerd asked in a kindly voice, "What's this all about, Tally?"

"We found out Zack has a disease called Soft Tissue Sarcoma, Gerd. It's a type of cancer that causes his body to grow tumors and about the only thing they can do for it is to surgically remove them. So far, we've been really lucky since none have been found in any of his internal organs."

Bill was taken aback and said, “He got those on the Providence, but no one ever said they were cancer. Now that you mention it though, more of the crew may have had the same thing. I’ve seen other scars that looked an awful lot like Zack’s.”

“He told me that too, but the corpsmen who did the cutting never biopsied the lumps or entered it in his medical records. And you know what? I’d be willing to bet they never wrote a single word about what they did to those other sailors either, and as ridiculous as it sounds, the VA says if it wasn’t documented, it never happened. So, even after seeing those scars of his, they still won’t fully cover him.”

“Is he here now?”

“No, he’s over at his dad’s sugar house but he should be back anytime.”

“How’s he doing?”

“Not so good. He’s having a flare-up we’re praying will go back into remission. Zack just had a growth in his arm that was too close to a nerve, so his doctor sent him down to Boston for radiation treatment. And the disease isn’t the biggest problem. What’s worse is Zack worries all the time about how deep in debt we’re getting and he doesn’t see any way out of it. He thinks if he doesn’t get better we’ll lose the farm, and the more he worries, the worse his illness gets. I have health insurance at work, but they wouldn’t cover him because they say his cancer’s a ‘pre-existing condition’ so the VA’s still our best bet, even though it costs us plenty every time he goes for treatments or gets medications. Boston was really expensive since he had to be down there for the better part of a week and had to pay for a motel. The VA said there was only room in the hospital for those with ‘service connected injuries and diseases,’ so he couldn’t stay there, if you can believe that. Worst of all, I couldn’t go with him. Without my job, we’d go under. The farm barely pays for itself and there are times when Zack can’t do much. The cancer treatments weaken him really badly.”

Gerd said, “On the way in, I noticed everything looked pretty good. Who’s helping him with it?”

“His dad does when he can, but Bert and Mavis Thurston are both here full time. We are so blessed having them with us. Bert worked the place by himself when Zack was still in the service so he knows what he’s doing. We couldn’t keep it going without them.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?” asked Bill.

“I wanted to but Zack wouldn’t let me. He doesn’t want to bother anyone with it, but it’s so good to see you two, and I know he’s going to be so happy that you’re finally here. He talks about you both all the time. Zack considers you family.”

“We are family, Tally. Zack and I are brothers.”

“He told me all about Hue, Bill.”

“He went through a lot more than Hue, although that was bad enough.”

“I know. That’s why I can’t believe the VA is treating him so unfairly. They’re giving full benefits to vets that never even went to Vietnam. All you have to do down there is say ‘Navy,’ and you can feel the chill,” she said, pouring them coffee.

“We’ve always been considered ‘the low man on the totem pole,’ Tally, but I’ll tell you something, just look at how many of our troops have been killed so far. Without our guns, you can be sure there’d be twice as many dead as that.”

ZACK CAME HURRYING into the kitchen. Although he was painfully thin, his smile illuminated the room. “Oh, dear Lord, thank You, three of my favorite people sitting at the table!” Then he noticed the dour expressions on their faces. “Tally’s spilled the beans, hasn’t she?”

Bill stood up shoving his chair backward, pointing his finger at Zack’s chest, “Yes, she did, Brother, what were you thinking? You should have told us the minute you found out!”

Zack sat down overwhelmed by Bill’s anger, and said quietly, “I didn’t want to burden you with it

“What a crock of shit, that’s what friends are for! We’re here to help.”

“You’ve already helped enough, Bill. We can really use that Bronco. We’ve been playing musical cars with both our families all winter long getting Tally to work and me to my appointments.”

Gerd leaned forward and said sternly, “Listen, Zack, we’re your friends. You need to remember that, and you need to do a better job staying in touch. Don’t you shut us out again.”

Zack thought it over before he replied, “When I found out it was cancer...when people found out I had it, it was like they stopped seeing me as a person and saw some kind of walking fungus instead. Several of my neighbors started avoiding me like they thought they might catch it. The whole thing was embarrassing and somehow made me feel like less of a man, so I just stopped telling anyone. But you are both right. Next to Tally, you’re my best friends. I should have told you, and I’m really sorry I didn’t. I screwed up big time.”

Gerd spoke directly to Zack, “There are times in our lives when we find out who our friends are. I’m not talking about acquaintances, but true friends, those we can absolutely trust and rely on, those who understand what the word ‘loyalty’ means. When these moments come they are almost always painful. The neighbors you mentioned are not worth spit, but you can be sure my family and I know exactly who you are and what is in your heart. You are one of us and we will always stand beside you, diseases be damned. Your apology is accepted, son, but from now on you keep us in the loop, ya’hear?”

“Loud and clear, Gerd. I promise.”

At those words Tally smiled for the first time since the Holmanns arrived, and said, “The family’ll be at the sugar house. Why don’t we ride over so you can meet them?”

“Great idea, Tally,” Gerd replied.

AS THEY WALKED outside, Zack noticed how tired both his friends were and offered, “I’ll drive if you want, Bill. You look beat.”

“Thanks, Brother, I sure am. I never thought I’d ever see any streets as awful as Magsaysay Drive, but yours might actually be worse. The keys are in the ignition.”

“At least we don’t have to dodge jitneys on ‘em. Are the hubs locked?”

“Do you really think we’d have made it this far without four-wheel drive?”

After piling into the Bronco, Gerd asked Tally, “What’s with your roads anyway? If there was a market for mud you’d all be rich.”

“They’re not always this bad, Gerd, but in April the ground thaws and the ice and snow melt off fast, causing floods. A lot of that run-off ends up on them and the entire state turns into one big mucky bog. We even have a name for it: ‘Mud Season.’ The good news is that it only lasts a few weeks. Most folks stay away until it’s over, but you two lucky guys got here right at the peak. The next time try coming in the fall when everything is nice and dry, and the leaves change into brilliant colors, which by the way, we call ‘Leaf Season.’ ”

“Are there any other extra seasons we should know about, Tally?”

“No, Gerd,” she answered, laughing with him, “I’m afraid we only have six.”

Bill asked, “Why do the highways here always seem to follow creeks and rivers?”

As Zack fishtailed onto Route Five, slinging rooster tails of muck in his wake, he replied, “Back in Colonial times the waterways and Indian trails that ran beside ‘em were the sole means of transportation. As the land was cleared and the population grew, those paths were gradually built up and widened into the roads we have now.”

Bill grinned, “Roads? What are you talking about? These aren’t roads. In fact, I have to tell you, Brother, driving through this sludge is more like riding the brown rivers back in Vietnam than traveling any roads I’ve ever been on. A motor Whaleboat might just work better on ‘em than a car ever would. No wonder you were such a damn good helmsman!”

Zack chuckled and Tally smiled happily for it had been a while since she had heard him laugh.

ONCE AGAIN THEY were back on a two-track road and the woods kept getting thicker and the road narrower. They finally approached a twenty-by-twenty-foot rough sided shack amidst a small clearing in the forest. A huge galvanized chimney jutting out of the rusty metal roof was billowing forth copious amounts of steam and smoke. The trees here were all maples and each had a hollow metal tap driven into its trunk from which hung a bucket to catch the sap. They went on in every direction as far as the eye could see. Parked out front was an ancient blue Ford tractor with a 100 gallon steel tank mounted behind it on a wagon. The snow here had melted down into hard pack, its surface glazed and crunchy. The trail leading to the sugar house was slippery mud, lined with ice on the sides, and required careful navigation.

“Hey, Dad,” Zack hollered, “I brought over some folks I’d like you to meet.”

Tom came out wearing a dirty set of overalls and a well patched black quilted jacket. It had been a long time since he’d shaved. Once sugar season started he rarely went home. Holly followed closely behind clothed in her usual print dress with an apron and now she had on a pair of muddy boots and a heavy red plaid jacket. She in turn was followed by Annie who was dressed the same as her mom.

Zack made the introductions. His mom gave Bill a giant hug saying, “I’ve waited so long to meet you, Professah. Thank you, thank you fo’ bein’ such a good friend to my Zack. He’s told us a lot about you.”

Bill ruefully replied, “If you’re already calling me ‘professor’ then I’m afraid he’s already told you too much.”

They all laughed and when Gerd and Tom shook hands, neither would release the grip. They too had waited a long time to meet and each liked what they saw. They instinctively knew they were both men who weren’t afraid to roll up their sleeves, get their hands dirty, and do a hard day’s work.

When they finally let go, Tom said, “Zack tells me you’ah intrested in maple sugah. Let me show you how it’s made.”

Gerd smiled happily and said, “Lead the way.”

Looking down at Gerd’s mud-encrusted cowboy boots Tom said, “Befo’ we staht, you’ll need somethin’ mo’ fittin’ on youah feet. Maybe Holly can get you an extry paiah at the house.”

Holly climbed on the tractor, fired it up saying, “I’ll see what I can find, deah,” and off she went.

AFTER TOM EXPLAINED the operation, Gerd thought, not much to it: drill the trees, pound in the taps, hang the buckets, empty them every day in the trailer’s bulk tank, siphon that out into the bigger tank in the sugar house, feed the fire, and boil the sap down forty-to-one into maple syrup: simple enough, but labor intensive. He could see Tom was strapped with Zack being unable to help, so he said, “Why don’t I bunk here and give you a hand? I’ve got nothing going on back at the ranch that can’t wait.”

Tom gratefully accepted and for the next three weeks Tom and Gerd made maple syrup.

WHEN THE PROFESSOR’S leave was over, Tom had agreed to drive the Holmanns to a small airstrip in Burlington where they had chartered a plane to fly them down to Boston. They stopped by Zack and Tally’s to collect Bill. Zack told him, “You give my best to Bilko and the boys.”

Bill cringed and said, “Don’t say that name, he has ears everywhere, but when I get back to the ship, he’ll sure want the lowdown on what you’re up to now.”

After they said their final good byes, Gerd exclaimed, “Uh oh, I forgot something,” and darted into the house. He was back in a flash and then they were off. When Tally and Zack returned to the kitchen, they found a check for fifteen-thousand dollars on the table with a note saying, “Hope

this'll help. Keep us in the loop. Thanks for the grand visit, Gerd and the Professor.”

Zack just shook his head in astonishment and embraced his wife as she burst into tears. He said softly, “I’m sorry, Tally, I should have told the Holmanns about my cancer when you wanted me to. It wasn’t fair to any of you. Please forgive me.” She answered him with a long, loving kiss.

AS TIME PASSED and the seasons changed, Zack didn’t get any better, but then again, he didn’t get a whole lot worse. After their visit, the Holmann and Martin clans became even closer. They may have lived on opposite sides of the country, but they were in constant communication with each other by mail and phone, and from that day forth, Zack stayed in close contact with Gerd and Bill, as did Tally with Alice and Barb.



CHAPTER 30

MEDICALLY RETIRED Lance Corporal Boudreau was stumping across the floor with his cane. He had done well in civilian life. His old friend and mentor, Gunnery Sergeant Malroy, retired the year before in 1976, and Boudreau had been running the department ever since. Most of his coworkers were more than a little afraid of him. The rumor was that his severe facial scarring and bad limp came from some sort of dangerous mission in Vietnam that had gone wrong. Boudreau had long ago located and buried his service records deep enough where they would never be found and he certainly didn't feel the need to enlighten anyone with the truth.

"Mr. Boudreau," said a little worm of a man with thick black glasses, as he submissively approached, "We have a problem, sir."

"Better come into my office, Henry."

They walked down a central corridor with endless warrens of tiny windowless cubicles on both sides, each containing one standard male or female Government Issue human, a desk, a phone, and a typewriter. The occupants were either, A: busy talking on their phones or, B: clacking away

on their typewriters. This was Boudreau's world and these were his minions; with them he could accomplish anything.

Boudreau's office was not one of those. His office occupied a corner of the building with a terrific view of the Lincoln Memorial and the Senate building. He sat behind his desk and painfully put his bad leg up on it. He did not offer Henry a seat.

"Now, what is it?"

"Well sir, we have an outreach worker in Chicago, her name is Millie DeWinter. She has noticed a startling amount of similar cancer cases with Vets coming back from Vietnam. She's sure they're connected to Agent Orange. Miss DeWinter has been calling everyone she can think of trying to figure out which branches of the service were responsible for spraying it, and to find out what it's made of."

"Agent what?" said Boudreau.

Henry gave him an odd look and said, "You know sir, you must have run into it in the 'Nam...the defoliant 'Agent Orange?'"

"Ah, how will this affect us?"

"It could be financially ruinous. If she can connect these cases and prove Agent Orange causes cancer, can you imagine how many claims will be filed? Just picking up the costs for the treatment would be catastrophic."

They both shuddered. As numbers men, the thought of soldiers getting cancer while serving their country didn't bother them a bit. But the thought of money going out to treat them raised Henry and Boudreau's blood pressure and gave them nightmares.

"You've got to do something, sir," Henry whined.

Boudreau thought for a couple of minutes and always decisive said, "This is what we're going to do, Henry. Transfer that bitch out of Chicago. Put her in some office in the backside of beyond. In fact, don't let her settle down anywhere. Just keep moving her around until she gets sick of it and quits. See to it, Henry."

"Will do, sir. You can count on me, sir."

ANOTHER YEAR ROLLED around and Boudreau had long forgotten about the whole thing when once again, Henry knocked on his office door and said, “We have a problem, sir.”

“What now, Henry?”

“It’s that blasted Millie DeWinter again. Do you remember her and those Agent Orange cancer patients last year?”

Boudreau nodded.

“She didn’t quit and she never stopped working on her little crusade. Even worse, she took it to the press. Read this, sir,” Henry said, handing him a newspaper. “There’s also going to be a full TV show on it tonight called, ‘Agent Orange: Vietnam’s Deadliest Fog.’”

The article stated there were definitive links between Agent Orange exposure and several cancers, one of which was Soft Tissue Sarcoma. It also mentioned the VA was dragging their feet in terms of helping exposed vets, and acknowledging the correlation between these cancers and the herbicide.

With his face turning redder by the second, Boudreau crumpled up the newspaper, threw it on the floor and bellowed, “This is a friggin’ disaster! It makes us look like shit! It says here Monsanto made this crap, is that right?!”

Everyone in their cubicles froze at the sound of his upraised voice. They looked like rabbits caught in the vegetable garden waiting for the farmer’s shotgun blast. Boudreau gazed through the glass partition at their frightened faces and thought, God, it’s wonderful to be so feared.

“Yes, sir, they did,” Henry said, bringing him back down to earth.

“Get their CEO on the phone right now. What we’re going to do is appoint an ‘Agent Orange Policy Group’ to investigate its effects on humans. That way we’ll appear concerned and proactive. We’ll study it for years if we can get away with it. We’ll get one of their researchers to chair the damn thing. One issue I’m sure the Monsanto CEO and I can certainly agree on, if the chairman of our Agent Orange Policy Group wants to keep his job, he’d better not find any direct linkage between this stuff and cancer. Not now, not ever. That should buy us some time and get us off the hook.”

“Good move, sir, and I’d like to point out, the more time we spend studying it, the fewer Vietnam Veterans there will be left alive to apply for benefits.”

“You’re right, that is a good point Henry, an excellent point, indeed.”



CHAPTER 31

IN THE EARLY WINTER of 2001, Zack and Tally were once again summoned down to the VA hospital. Dr Rosen ushered them into his office with a worried look on his face. When they sat down he told them in his usual blunt way, “I’m afraid I have some bad news for you both. Although everything appeared fine at your last appointment, I had a hunch and ran a few tests. It seems Zack’s Sarcomas masked the early stages of Non-Hodgkin’s Lymphoma, which has now progressed to stage two.”

They were both devastated, but this was Tally’s world, her field of expertise. She had many questions, but for now they could wait. She quickly regained her composure and cut right to the chase, “How much time does he have left?”

“Well, we can’t rightly predict....”

Tally demanded, “Listen Doctor, just give us the odds.”

Rosen thought it over and said, “About thirty-five percent make it for five years. We are going to treat this aggressively with chemotherapy followed by radiation.” And that’s what they did.

The body of knowledge about Agent Orange had grown and the legislation had grown along with it. Now with his two “signature cancers” Zack was considered “presumptive for exposure.” In other words, his two types of illnesses had been specifically linked to Dioxin, the ingredient in Agent Orange known to cause these diseases. Since the passage of the “1992 Agent Orange Act,” he no longer had to pay for his medical treatments or medications. This cheered him up immeasurably. It wasn’t about the money, he explained to Tally, but he felt the VA had badly dishonored his service. Now he held his head up high when he entered the hospital.

Zack was unable to help on the farm anymore. Tally thanked God daily for Bert and Mavis. Zack was just too sick. When they put him on the chemo he hadn’t been able to keep down any solid food for almost a month. Every time he’d try to eat something he’d just throw it right back up. He looked like he was made out of a bundle of sticks, but he still had his sense of humor and pride. He was still her Zack.

He never complained, but Tally had been taking care of sick people for long enough now that she had learned all the little ways patients attempted to hide their pain, so in spite of his best efforts, Zack couldn’t keep it from her. It just tore her up that he tried so hard to spare her from knowing how much agony he was in. After his new diagnosis Tally wasted no time calling Alice and filling her in.

Four weeks after Zack’s final radiation treatment Gerd called and got right to the point, “My doctors tell me you should be well enough to travel now. I want you to come out here and have my team look you over; reconfirm your diagnosis and check out your treatments. In other words, let’s get a second opinion. You should plan on being here for at least two weeks, and Tally, don’t worry about your pay or expenses. This is on our dime and you can stay at the beach cottage while you’re here.”

TOM AND HOLLY used any excuse to stay close to Zack and Tally. Tom spent every spare second he could puttering around the machinery and

helping Bert in the barn. Holly was always bringing over jams and pies. She kept house and looked after Zack while Tally was at work. Annie now had a family of her own with three boys, but she came over often, too. The doctors had been telling them one thing, but the family's eyes told them a completely different story.

ZACK'S PARENTS drove them across the state to the new Burlington Airport for their flight to L.A. On the way back home, Tom said, "You know Holly, I don't think he can go on much longah like this."

Holly began crying softly. When she found her voice, she said, "He's my fust bohn, ouah only son. I'll nevah fo'get the joy a holdin' him in my ahms fo' the fust time. I've nevah loved another like I love that boy. We both see the same things, Tom. He's in bad pain all the time, and it'll be a mercy when his sufferin's ovah, but its goin'ta rip my heaht right outta my chest, it's just goin'ta tear it in two," and then she doubled over in her seat and started sobbing as if she'd never stop.

In all their fifty years of marriage Tom had never seen Holly cry like this. She was usually uncomplaining and stoic, but the dam had finally broken loose. Tears of his own ran as he rubbed her back and tried to comfort her. Zack was their boy, their golden child, and they had now come face to face with the fact that he would soon die. There was nothing they, or the doctors, or anyone else could do about it. It was in God's hands now.

As Tom drove, he thought about the trouble Zack had over the years coming up with co-pays and getting to his appointments all over the Northeast. He also remembered the huge amounts of money the IRS had gouged out of Tally's tax returns for his son's treatments and medications. If the damn VA had just done the right thing from the beginning Zack would have been spared so much worry, so much anguish, and aggravation that, who knows? Maybe the outcome might have turned out different. Damn the VA and all the bureaucrats that run it, who are so quick to run over a veteran to save a buck. God damn them, thought Tom who never cussed.

God damn every last one of them. Our own damn country killed my boy in Vietnam, he just hasn't died yet.

GERD AND BILL met them at the airstrip. Bill was starting to look more and more like his dad. He wore the signature western shirt, jeans, and cowboy boots. He had finally quit messing around and was working with his father on the ranch.

When they saw Zack, they couldn't believe how awful he looked. His head was as frail as an egg and his skin was paper thin. His chemo hair was growing out thin and wispy like a baby bird's.

When Zack saw them he lit up with a huge pumpkin-like grin and said, "Hey there, two of my favorite people!"

They hugged him very gently and all they felt were bones with, oh so little meat on them. On the way out to the limo Bill caught his father's eye, and gave a little shake of his head. Both men were appalled at Zack's terrible appearance and Bill was holding back tears.

ZACK AND TALLY stayed at Barb's and it was good for them. They had a lot of wonderful memories there. Barb bustled through periodically to check the refrigerator and restock it. There were always lobsters and abalone on hand, for she believed in the restorative powers of seafood. Alice often came over and took long walks along the beach with Tally.

The first week was spent at the Cancer Research Center at UC Santa Barbara, a facility that the Holmann's endowed. Zack and Tally were treated with kindness and respect. He was given one battery of tests after another. Zack was poked, prodded, biopsied, MRied, CT scanned, and went through a broad spectrum of blood work. No avenue of Zack's cancer was left unexplored. When the tests results were all in, Gerd asked if he, Alice and Bill could come along to hear the results.

Tally spoke for them both when she quietly said, "Yes, of course, Gerd."

Dr. Ramos, a small, dark-skinned oncologist and the Institute's Director, sat them down, and took a minute to give Zack's paperwork a final look. He took his glasses off, wiped his face with his handkerchief and said, "They say a policeman's worse job is notifying families of victims who have just lost their lives. This job is often the same. There are two ways most of us do this. No one likes to hear bad news, but many of us don't like to give it, either, so some doctors will utter soothing platitudes rather than explaining the harsh facts of reality. They don't actually lie, they just skirt the truth and both the patients and the doctor leave the room feeling much relieved. The patient thinks he has a chance and the doctor didn't have to look him in the eye while he pronounced his death sentence. We can do this either way, Zack," he said kindly. "It's your choice."

"I already know, Doctor. I've known for quite a while now, but why don't you give it to me straight, so my wife and friends will get the picture."

"All right, Zack, I'm sorry to say the cancer has spread everywhere now. It has metastasized well beyond the lymph nodes. It's in your organs, it's in your blood, and will soon be in your bones. There is nothing we can do to slow it down let alone stop it. I know how badly it must hurt. You mask it well, but my tests don't lie. You need a treatment plan that includes pain management with some real strong medications."

"I've tried them, Doc, but they put me on another world. I want to be here, in the present, with my family and friends, not in a coma, drooling."

"Let me be frank. The pain is just getting started. When the cancer really gets going in your bones, you will be begging God to put you in that coma on another world."

"I'll think about it, and at some point I'll probably have to, but I want to put it off as long as I can. Let me ask you this: How much time do I have left?"

Dr. Ramos took off his glasses again, wiped his face, and said, "An optimistic outlook would be three months."

Like the good doctor said, no one wants to hear news like that, but no one in that room was much surprised by it either.

TALLY AND ZACK walked along the beach with Zack bundled up in a winter jacket even though it wasn't cold. He looked over at Tally and said, "I love you, Tally, but you deserve a better life than the one you've had with me. You know what my biggest disappointment has been?"

"What Zack, dear?"

"Not having children. When we were married I know we both wanted a big family, but once we found out what the Agent Orange had done to me, that door was pretty much slammed shut."

"I know, Zack. I'll never forget the pictures of those poor deformed children whose fathers had been exposed."

Zack stopped walking, turned to face her, gripped her shoulders, looked her straight in the eyes and said, "Promise me, Tally, my love, promise me you'll marry again. You deserve another chance at happiness."

Tally began sobbing and grabbed Zack in a hug.

Zack said softly, "You still have time, you're not too old. You deserve a life, a real life when I'm gone."

"I have been happy, Zack. I thank God for every day He gives us together. Stop talking this way, Zack! I love you!"

"I love you, too, Tally, but I've been thinking real hard about discontinuing my drugs. I know I don't have much time left. Making it a little shorter isn't going to change much. I love you more than life itself, Tally, but it tears me up to think of all I've saddled you with. The good Lord knows this isn't what I wanted for you, what I thought our lives together would be. There are times I just want it to be over so that you can move on with your life."

"Oh, Zack," she cried, "You're all I ever wanted; I love you with all my heart, with my very soul. It's my joy to be with you 'in sickness, and in health,' and it's my great privilege to be able to help you, to take care of you. I will never regret one minute of my time with you. Not even one second. You are the love of my life, Zack Martin, my dear, loving husband. You know that!"

“I’m sorry, Tally. It’s the pain talking. Sometimes my whole body feels like it’s being roasted over a hot fire. I can hardly stand it. The pills don’t help anymore.”

“I’m sorry, too, Zack, and we’ll find something that’ll make you feel better.”

“I’m not so sure about that, but thanks for taking such good care of me, Tally. No matter what happens, being married to you has been more of a blessing than I could ever have hoped for.”

She turned into him and gave his thin, brittle body a gentle hug and tears flowed freely down both their cheeks.

THE MARTINS AND HOLMANNNS said their good byes on the tarmac. Alice took one of Tally’s hands in both of her’s and said, “You call me as often as you can, Sweetie. I’m always here for you. Don’t forget, we love you both.”

“I won’t, Alice. I can never thank you for all you have done for us.”

“There’s no need for that, we are family you and I,” she said embracing her. “You and Zack are my other children, the children of my heart. If you need anything at all, if I can help in any way, you call me right up, Tally.”

“I will, Alice. I will. We love you, too.”

AFTER ZACK AND TALLY boarded their flight, Bill said sadly, “I can’t believe how bad he looks. I don’t think we’re going to see him again.”

Gerd thought about it a minute, took a last drag on his cigarette, threw it down, crushed it out, and replied, “We’ll be seeing him sooner than you think, Bill. He can’t last too much longer like this. After he passes, we’ll be flying east for the funeral. You’d better keep your bags packed and ready, and I’ll put a charter on standby. What’s your take, Alice?”

Weeping quietly she answered, “I’m afraid you’re right, Gerd. Losing Zack will be hard enough on all of us, but when I think of what Tally’s going to go through once he dies, it just breaks my heart.”



CHAPTER 32

VA DEPARTMENT CHIEF Marvin Boudreau and his toady Henry Pibbles, were ushered into the conference room by the VA Secretary's personal assistant.

"Have a seat, gentlemen. There's coffee in the carafes. The Secretary and the White House team will be here shortly. Make yourselves at home."

They poured cups of coffee and started spreading their reference materials out in front of them on the long table. Boudreau was more nervous than he'd been since those ONI pukes came sniffing around in the Olongapo hospital. If he could pull this off, his revenge against the Navy would be complete, more than complete. This would screw over every squid who ever served on a ship in Vietnam. He knew some of those bastards from the Kit Kat Klub could still be alive, and he prayed to his hate gods that this would reach out and hit them hard wherever they were.

"You ready for this, Henry?"

"Oh, definitely, sir. All of our ducks are in a row. I have all the answers to their potential questions on cue cards and as they're asked, I'll slide the cards over to you."

“Thanks Henry, this was a stroke of genius.”

Henry beamed, like a dog being told he was a good boy. He did everything but wag his tail in pure sycophantic pleasure.

“Thank you, sir!”

The door opened up and half a dozen men in power suits and five-hundred dollar haircuts, paid for, of course, by the taxpayers of this great nation, came strolling in. Boudreau knew the study would garner attention, but nothing like this. The Secretary of Defense and the VA Secretary sat down across the table from him.

The VA Secretary made the introductions, not that any were needed. Boudreau and Henry recognized them straight away, and they in turn didn't give a damn who these flunkies sitting across the table from them were. The Secretary of Defense, Ronald Rumsdorf, who looked remarkably like the “Tin Man” in the “Wizard of Oz,” started it off with, “Gentlemen, we are here for the purpose of listening to your proposal. If we like it, and if we think the American public will accept it, we'll go ahead. Now, Boudreau, is it? Why don't you proceed as if we know nothing.”

“Yes, sir. As you gentlemen well know, the vets returning from the war in Afghanistan have overloaded and broken our system. Now you've tasked us with making projections to treat a similar amount of casualties in a pending war with Iraq. As it stands right now, we just can't do it. We don't even have the resources to deal with our current case-loads. We're doing the best we can with what we're allocated, but we're not magicians. Can I speak freely?”

Rumsdorf said, “Of course you can. Nothing said here leaves this room.”

“Okay then, the propaganda to support this war has been amazing, I only wish it'd been like this when we were in Vietnam. It has been so effective that Americans now regard anyone who wears a uniform as a 'hero.' Even some fat-assed supply sergeant handing out condoms to troops in Kansas is a hero. Hell, they're all heroes now.

“If the public even thinks for a minute these new vets aren't getting first class treatment, they'll come after us with pointed sticks. We know cuts have

to be made somewhere, that's obvious. The government just isn't giving us enough money to carry out our mission any other way. It's simply a tactical decision like in Vietnam where someone must die so many others may live," he said with his trademark thousand-yard stare.

Everyone gave him a moment of respect to pull himself together. Clearly, they thought, this man has paid some heavy dues, and he had, but not in 'Nam as they so incorrectly assumed. Boudreau was not thinking of the Viet Cong whom he had never faced in combat, but rather of those nameless squids who had ambushed and stomped the crap out of him so many years ago in the Philippines. He was also remembering the Navy doctors who had carelessly and incompetently bungled the operation on his crippled leg, nor would he ever forget those loathsome little Navy bitches who had taken so much pleasure tormenting him in the hospital during his horrendous recovery. His list of grievances against the Navy was endless, but the time had finally come, it was now within his grasp to even the score and pay them all back big time.

His scarred face twisted into a half-smile as he continued, "So I had Mr. Pibbles here go through the books to find out which military demographic the public would likely overlook being trimmed back and he came up with the 'Naval Agent Orange Veterans' and he's right. Nobody cares about them. Hell, no one even knows what the Navy did in 'Nam.

"So we propose dividing Vietnam Navy Vets into two classifications: 'Brown Water' and 'Blue Water.' Brown water will be those who served in the rivers and inland waters. Blue water will be those who served offshore on larger ships: destroyers, cruisers, carriers, and the like. We've done some discreet polling and the public will accept it. Their perception is that the inland sailors were heroes too, whereas the deep water squids were just a bunch of lazy-assed, screw-ups who sailed around the world getting drunk and paying for hookers with the tax-payer's money.

"As you know, since the '1992 Agent Orange Act,' all that is required for 'Presumptive Exposure to Agent Orange' is that the claimant was awarded

the Vietnam Service Medal. We propose striking that. The new requirement will state that DD-214 Service Records must now say directly that the applicant served on land 'In-Country' or they must prove they were in brown water, which will be next to impossible for any of them to do. If you give us your approval, we'll be able to immediately cut off Blue Water Navy Vets from all Agent Orange related benefits. This should leave us plenty of money for our new homecoming Afghanistan and Iraqi war heroes."

Rumsdorf said, "I'm not as sure as you that the public will accept it."

Boudreau replied, "It's all in how we sell it, sir. We aren't really cutting anyone off, we've just changed the requirements. We'll take it on a case by case basis, but none of them will be able to prove 'their feet touched the ground' or they were in 'brown water.' We must NEVER admit that it was even remotely possible that anyone could have been exposed to Agent Orange unless they were on the actual land-mass of Vietnam.

"We must also emphasize that many who were issued the Vietnam Service Medal never should have received it in the first place. For example: Air Force flight crews who flew over Vietnam en route, to say, Thailand, and Navy ships that never left Yankee Station which was a hundred miles offshore. It will be our new position that Navy ships always operated far away at sea, and those that didn't serve on land, will no longer be considered 'Vietnam Veterans' by the VA. All those others will be reclassified as 'Vietnam Era Vets.'

Rumsdorf said, "What greatly concerns me is this new study by the Australian Government. It's my understanding that they claim the men on their ships that operated with us in 'Nam, have a much higher cancer rate than their soldiers who served on the ground. Their studies show the desalination process actually concentrated the Agent Orange in their water supply, and they're giving full benefits to their Blue Water Navy Vets."

Henry slid Boudreau a cue card. He looked down at it and replied, "As I'm sure you're well aware, Mr. Secretary, we do everything by the book here, no exceptions. We requested information from the Department of

Defense on how the Navy makes its freshwater and they never got back to us. Therefore, we just don't know where they got it from. For all we know, they restocked it from oilers, or took it onboard in port. Furthermore, it's our position that the Australian study you just mentioned is badly flawed

"Another thing to consider: there were less than 229,000 sailors who served in the Blue Water Navy. I know the DOD says there were double that number but their statistics assume that crew members only did one tour each, when in actuality most deployed two or more times. Now 229,000 might not sound like a lot to you, but most of them are sick and they all submit claim after claim. We haven't quite figured out a completely accurate way of establishing how many of them are still alive, although we do know for certain that they're dying at a faster rate than World War Two and Korean War Vets put together.

"What does this mean to Congress? It means the Blue Water Navy doesn't have a big enough voting block for them to bother going out on a limb for. What does it mean for us? It means after we take away their 'Presumptive Exposure to Agent Orange,' there won't be enough of them left to make much of a fuss about it, either."

There was a long silence as the White house team digested the information.

Boudreau asked, "Any more questions, gentlemen?"

Rumsdorf said, "Thank you for the final solution to our problem. I think you're on to something. I doubt the public will blink an eye. I must say it sounds good, really good, and I want you, Mr. Secretary, to schedule a press conference later today. I want to get the ball rolling on this right away. Let's go gentlemen."

"Uh, Mister Secretary..." said Boudreau.

Rumsdorf impatiently turned, and said, "Yes, what is it?"

"Sir, I don't think a press conference is the way to handle this."

Boudreau definitely had their attention now.

"What do you suggest?"

“I don’t think we should take a chance of provoking the public’s anger, sir. I don’t know if you remember, but back in 1978 we had a whistleblower who got everyone looking at the links between Agent Orange and certain types of cancers, and we sure ended up on the wrong end of that stick. It took us years to earn back the public’s trust. Why take a chance of it happening again? I respectfully suggest we quietly put the changes we have now discussed and agreed upon in our ‘2002 M21-1 Adjudication Manual.’ Once we do that our problem is solved. That manual is our bible. Every VA facility in the United States of America and her Territories uses it to determine eligibility. If we do it this way, the public won’t know squat. What they don’t know won’t hurt them, or more importantly, it won’t piss them off. Handling it this way also reduces the possibility of a backlash against the VA or your Administration.”

The Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of the VA conferred for a few minutes and then Rumsdorf said, “Do it.”

“Yes, sir!” said Boudreau with gusto, and in that way he finally exacted payback on those damned squids from the Kit Kat Klub.



CHAPTER 33

DOCTOR RAMOS WAS WRONG. Eight months later Zack was holding onto life as desperately as a man holding onto a thin branch while hanging off the edge of a steep cliff. He and Tally were broke and had taken out a second mortgage on their farm. Tally's retirement account was long gone. But the doctor had been right about the pain. It was so constant, unremitting, and off the charts, that it was all he could do not to scream. The medications no longer helped. If it had been up to him he'd have taken his own life long ago, but Zack was on a mission.

When they returned from California he had finally submitted an application for disability benefits to the VA, and like the tattoos on Chief McCoy's hands, he knew he had to "hold fast" until it came through. He had been assured there would be no problem. It was just a matter of time and Zack was living for that day. When it came through, he could let go and die happily knowing Tally would be taken care of after he was gone. His claim would be retroactive to the day he filed it, and she would get survivor benefits. She'd be okay. Meanwhile, he spent most of his time sitting in a Barcalounger watching TV. Even the slightest movement caused him extreme pain.

The phone rang. It took him a while to pick it up, but Howell was still on the other end. He had early stage Parkinson's, which was now included on the ever growing list of Agent Orange related diseases. Howell had a claim in, too. He had settled down in Montana with a beautiful Mexican-American wife and was employed by the railroad. He wasn't sure just how long he could keep his job though, because the doctors told him his illness was of "rapid onset" which didn't bode well for his future. He was depending on full disability from the VA when he could no longer work.

"Zack," he shouted into the phone, "I called the VFW today and they told me my application's been shot down. The VA put out some kind of a new 'Eligibility Guideline Manual' and Navy Vets whose feet 'Never touched the ground' in 'Nam can't get compensation for Agent Orange exposure anymore. Those sons-a-bitches're even saying we was never 'Vietnam Vets' to begin with. They told me I was a 'Vietnam Era Vet' whatever the hell that is. Tell me if I'm remembering wrong, but didn't you and me go to Vietnam?"

Zack was alarmed and adrenaline slowly began flowing into his body, easing some of the intolerable pain. "Of course we did, Mike, more than once. Let me call and check on mine and I'll get right back to you."

Zack's application was being handled by the DAV. The hospital in White River Junction had grown so large that claims were now outsourced through the various National Veterans Organizations for processing.

He called his DAV Service Officer.

"Hello, let me speak to Fred, please."

"Fred here."

"Fred, this is Zack Martin."

"I was just going to call you, Zack. I'm afraid I have some real bad news. The VA just changed their guidelines and you've been denied benefits."

"What?! I've been waiting forever. You told me it was in the bag."

"I'm sorry, Zack. What they're telling us now is that there is no way 'Blue Water' sailors like you could have been exposed. Under the new guidelines

you have to prove you were in what they call ‘Brown or Inland Waters’ or that your feet actually ‘Touched the ground of Vietnam.’ ”

“That’s the craziest thing I’ve ever heard. How the hell would I do that? We were up the rivers and in the harbors the whole damn time. We were in deadly waters brown and muddy enough to walk on. I’ll let you in on a little secret Fred: during the monsoon, the coastal run-off turned the sea brown way beyond the twelve mile limit. And where do you suppose all that Agent Orange went? Do you think it stayed behind on land, Fred? Well I’ll tell you where it went, it washed into the water with all that damn mud and when we desalinated it, the Dioxin was concentrated in our water supply. Then we drank it, showered in it, cooked in it, and washed our clothes in it every damn day. I’m surprised we don’t all glow in the dark. It doesn’t take a damn rocket scientist to figure out why so many of us have cancer!”

“I’m really sorry, Zack. It is what it is. I’d like to help you but my hands are tied. We have to go by the book.”

“I know you do, Fred, and it’s certainly not the first or second time one of you has told me that, but the VA wrote that damn book and they rewrite it whenever they think they can get away with screwing us out of the benefits we paid for with our blood. Hell, Fred, we gave our health for this country and nobody cares enough about us to hold their feet to the fire and force them to do the right thing!”

Zack hung up totally defeated and called Howell back.

“They rejected my claim too, Mike, same as you.”

“I don’t know what I’m going to do, Zack,” Howell groaned, “I was really counting on the VA to come through when the railroad lays me off. I have nowhere else to turn. My family’s totally out of luck now.”

Zack sighed deeply, “I don’t know what I’m going to do either. Tally’s in the same boat as your family.”

“Yeah, and that boat’s up shit’s creek without a paddle. What I don’t get is all this blue water, brown water crap. The water was always brown where

we were! They make it sound like none of us ever got any closer to shore than Yankee Station.”

“You got that right, Howell, even on the Providence we were in brown water most of the time. Don’t these rear echelon draft dodging pukes know you always go in close to get a more effective target range?”

“I guess not... Hey, Zack, you remember when we chased that big cargo junk up the river?”

“Sure do. It took us the better part of three days to clean all that muck off the ship.”

“I don’t know if I’d call it muck. It was more like shit all washed down from the rice paddies.”

“You’ll get no argument from me there. Man, it stunk worse than the Olongapo River.”

“Ain’t that the truth? Funny, I don’t remember it being blue, do you?”

“No I don’t, but according to the VA, blue is the new brown.”

They talked a bit more, promised to stay in touch, and then hung up.

Zack thought disgustedly, my claim’s as dead in the water as that damn cargo junk we were just talking about. Now those cheap bastards will start charging us co-pays for treatments and meds again. It was at that very moment that all hope left him like air escaping from a leaky balloon.

WHEN TALLY CAME HOME from work he explained it to her. She said, “Oh, Zack, it doesn’t matter. We’ll find a way.”

“I don’t think so, Tally. Every time you think the VA’s finally going to do the right thing, they figure out a new way to cheat us. It’s never going to change.”

AFTER SUPPER ZACK gave her a long, loving embrace, and told her, “I love you, Tally. Never forget that.” He kissed her tenderly and said, “I’ve got to do something in the barn.”

“All right, dear, come right back.” She was glad to see him get up and move around.

Zack didn't reply. She thought, he must not have heard me, and busied herself with the dishes.

ZACK WALKED INTO the barn, got a hammer, and in plain sight he nailed up an envelope with a letter inside. In bold print on the front, it said, “To Tally, My Love.”

He picked up his hunting rifle, which he had stashed out there quite some time ago, and went around behind the barn.

TALLY HEARD THE SHOT RING OUT. Intellectually she didn't recognize it for what it was, but in her soul she knew. SHE KNEW! Even if she hadn't heard it she'd have known because she felt that elastic-like invisible cord that had always attached her to her Zack, stretch thin, thinner, and then snap, as Zack forever flew from this world. She felt that shot, she felt it as if it had gone right through her own heart, and it hurt so badly she thought she would die, too. She sank to the floor sobbing.

ON THE WAY to Vermont the Holmann tribe flew into Twin Falls, Montana to pick up Howell and his wife, Rosa. When they boarded they were surprised to see the Learjet's brown leather furniture that made it look more like a living room than the interior of a plane. After they took off and reached cruising altitude, Hector served everyone drinks. The talk, of course, quickly turned to Zack.

Barb said, “I remember when I first met him. He was like a visiting professor from the school of ‘been there, done that.’ He may have dropped out of high school, but after one tour in Vietnam, he had the whole thing figured out. Paul asked him a question, and Zack made him answer it himself first, and then asked another one of his own before, he'd even take him seriously.”

Paul smiled at the memory, “Here’s this kid about the same age as one of my youngest undergraduates, and he turned the whole conversation back on me. His questions were direct and provocative. His positions on the war were more rationally thought out, and far ranging than any I had heard up ‘til then. He even threw the Bible and religion at it. He was way ahead of his time. He blew me away.”

Bill chimed in, “You weren’t the only one Zack blew away. People were always underestimating how damn smart he was. They took him for an uneducated country bumpkin, a ‘Fahmah fum Vamont.’ When the Captain ordered him into the Navigation Division on the Providence, the Quartermasters treated him like a mentally defective child, but within three weeks he taught himself celestial navigation from books he found lying around the chart house. It amused him to watch his first and second class petty officers struggle with it. They had to learn it to advance, but Zack learned it for the fun of it, kind of like doing a crossword puzzle, and he never mentioned it to any of them. He loved being their deck ape. He said it gave him a lot more freedom because they didn’t expect much from him. All he had to do was man the helm at critical times. Damn, I’m gonna miss him so much. I just can’t believe he’s gone.”

Alice said, “To me, the most disturbing thing of all is that Zack was a total Patriot. He detested that war, and yet he never once questioned, or refused an order. We all know how he hated being part of the gun crew, absolutely loathed it, but whether or not he agreed with something made no difference to him. If Zack considered it his duty, he did it.”

Gerd replied, “You’re right, Alice. His sense of obligation always trumped his personal feelings. The real crime here is how the VA weaseled out of their responsibility to him and all you Navy guys who served in Vietnam. Hell, when Bill and I visited him and Tally in Vermont, they were in desperate straits because the VA refused to admit he had those Sarcomas cut out of his arms when he was still in the service, and that was after he showed them the scars. Even the Apostle Thomas was forced to

change his mind when he was confronted with Christ's wounds, but not the damn VA."

Howell jumped in, "You guys make him sound like some kind of anti-war intellectual. He was real smart, I'll give you that, but you have to remember, Zack was like me. He was a fighter. When I started all that crap back at the Kit Kat Klub in the Philippines I had no idea how bad it would turn out. If I did, I wouldn't a gone near that place, but it all happened too damn fast. We went in, and when that arrogant son-of-a-bitch mouthed off I figured I could cold-cock him and we'd run out a there before anyone had a chance to retaliate, but the minute I hit him, Zack had my back. That's when I found out he knew how to take care of himself. Tally told me later he had three letters in wrestling, and boxed for the fun of it. She figured if he hadn't a dropped out a high school, he'd a wrestled for state champ in his weight class."

"I couldn't agree more, Mike. I knew who he was when I took him lobster diving. He had absolutely no fear. He definitely had a hard side, but we all know there was a lot more to him than just that. If I had to use one word to describe him, I think I'd have to choose between loving and loyal, but he was certainly tough enough. Dr. Ramos could hardly believe he held on for as long as he did."

Howell spoke up again, "He wasn't staying alive for himself, Barb, it was all for Tally. He'd a held on 'til Judgment Day if he thought he could get her some benefits. He was just waiting to make sure she was taken care of by the VA. When he found out that wasn't never going to happen, he pulled the plug. God, he loved that girl. He loved that girl from day one."

Bill said, "Don't forget, Tally loved him every bit as much or more. The hardships they went through were incredible, and yet their love never wavered. They always remained true to each other. Dad, what about Tally?"

"Tally's in bad shape. The problem is she's fifty-five years old and has a mortgage when she should've been banking profits from the farm and her 401-K for years now. Our wonderful government has gobbled up their

money, and her retirement. She's every bit as much a casualty of the Vietnam War as Zack ever was, but don't worry, when this all settles down, we'll look into it and get her straightened out."

"Who's going to help her get through this, Dad? Are her parents still alive?"

Gerd sighed, "No, they passed away several years ago, but I'd be surprised if your mother doesn't have some thoughts on that subject." Looking around at their miserable faces, he continued, "You know, I can't help wondering how his life would've turned out, how far he could've gone if he hadn't had to spend all his time dealing with medical issues, cancer treatments, and the damn VA almost from the very day he came home from Vietnam."

They all sat back, each lost in their own gloomy thoughts for a while before Bill finally answered, "I guess we could kick that around for the rest of the flight, Dad, but all Zack ever wanted to do was farm. Sure, if he had been well and wanted to try his hand at something else he would have succeeded, although that isn't the point. The real issue here is that he was exposed to Agent Orange while serving his country in a war zone, and when he got sick the Veterans Administration cheated him and Tally out of their savings by denying him compensation for it. And even after they destroyed his health and trashed their financial future it still wasn't good enough for those greedy bastards, and they finally snuffed out that last small ember of hope keeping him alive: the hope of getting Tally 'Dependency Indemnity Compensation,' or Survivor's Benefits....I just can't believe..." Overcome by his emotions he struggled to pull himself together and continued, "I just can't believe my brother survived four tours in Vietnam to end up dying like this."

Alice shook her head sadly, "No, Bill, he didn't survive Vietnam. It just took its own sweet time killing him."

THE FUNERAL at the Meadow Meeting House was a dismal affair. The day was sunny and bright and blue, which only made it worse. Tally had never been happier than when she and Zack were married in God's presence right

here in this church. This is where they pledged their lives and their loves to one another. Now she was back here to bury her husband, her light, her love, on this, the darkest day of her life. She didn't know how she could live without him, how she could go on. She knew she shouldn't be having these thoughts, and Lord knows she prayed for them to go away, but when she looked down upon her beloved Zack, her beloved husband's wasted, lifeless body lying in his wooden coffin, all she could think of was damn the Navy, damn the government, and damn the VA all to hell!

AFTER THE SERVICE they went to Tally's home for the post-funeral dinner. Many of the people there told stories about Zack, of his honesty, his decency, and his sense of humor. But it was Howell who stood up, tapped a spoon to his glass and said, "Listen up. I've known Zack since we were both seventeen years old on the USS Hawke. We been through a lot together, more than I can ever say, but I can tell you this, the most important thing in his life ever since the first day I met him has always been you, Tally Goodwin, Tally Martin."

Bill joined in, "That's right, Tally. He loved you more than anything in this world. Doctor Ramos says he can't believe he held on this long, can't comprehend the suffering he went through. He's in a better place now."

SOMEHOW Tally got through it all. She knew everyone was trying to cheer her up. She knew they all loved her and her Zack; she felt their love but her mind just wasn't working right, it seemed to be skipping a gear. She felt like a broken clock. She was here but she wasn't here. The past kept slipping into the present. Her mind was all a hodgepodge of faces and memories, but in the middle of it all, all she could see was Zack in his coffin. She tried to be there for them, tried to be a good hostess, but that gear just kept slipping, too. Tally couldn't stop crying and felt the concern in Alice's voice when she told Gerd to go home without her, that she'd be staying in Vermont for awhile, but Tally just couldn't grasp the meaning of words anymore.

WHEN SHE CAME AROUND AGAIN she found herself lying on the couch, but had no recollection of how she got there. Everyone had left and Zack's mom, Annie, and Mavis were cleaning up. When Holly saw she was awake, she said through her tears, "Why, Tally, why did he do this? T'was a mortal sin what he done."

Tally managed to pull herself together, got herself back into the here and now, and said, "Come upstairs, Mom, and you'd better come too, Annie. There's something you both need to see."

Alice gently helped her up, and they all went upstairs to her and Zack's bedroom. On top of their dresser was a keepsake box that her mother had given her long ago when she was a young girl. She opened it. In it were her most precious possessions, such as the small pebbles, shells, and beach glass she had picked up where ever she and Zack had made love, a small red plastic shark with "Welcome to L.A.!" printed on its side, and his Junk Force beret with all his medals and ribbons: the Vietnam Service Medal with two bronze stars and a silver star, the coveted Naval Combat Action Ribbon, and so many others. It also contained all the letters Zack had written her while in Vietnam. From it she removed an envelope tied with a red ribbon. Tally unfastened the bow and took out the last letter that her love, her Zack, would ever write her. The ink was stained with both of their tears, but the writing was still legible. She handed it to them. "Read this," she said in a choked whisper and sat down on the edge of their bed, crying. Alice sat down next to her and held her tightly while stroking her hair and murmuring soft words of comfort to her as one would do for a small, lost child. There wasn't a dry eye or an unbroken heart in that room as Zack's mother and sister read:

My Dearest Tally, my love, my wife,

Please forgive me, and do not blame yourself for what I have done. The only thing you are guilty of is being the best wife a man could ever have. The pain is just more than I can take, and it just keeps getting worse. If you must blame someone blame the

Monsanto Chemical Company for selling Agent Orange to the military, or blame the military for using it without testing it, or blame the VA, who has shown us time and time again they value money more than they value our very lives. They did this to me, not you, so don't blame yourself, Tally.

I see now it wouldn't have made any difference if I had gotten disability. They're even making those of us who've already received benefits reapply and, you can be sure once they do, the VA will cut every one of them off without so much as a dime. All of us Agent Orange Vietnam Navy Vets are in the same boat, and the VA is doing everything it can to sink it while no one tries to stop them.

It hurts me to part from you, Tally my love. It hurts even worse than the unbearable pain of this cancer. I have loved you with my whole heart since we first met. You were the only woman I've ever wanted, and my love for you has always remained true. Although I die troubled about our debts, at least my leaving will stop good money being thrown after bad. My cancers and increasing pain will just be harder and harder on you. I can see your love for me on your face, in your smile, I can feel it in your touch, but I can also see how my agony affects you, too. It is better for us both that I end this now.

God is love, and I know he will forgive me. My love for you is so strong, so lasting that I know we will be reunited in a place where we will once again be healthy and whole; a place where we will never again have to suffer the anguish of separation.

When your time comes, I will be there for you. When you close your eyes for the last time, when you take your last breath, I will take your hand and lead you to the Promised Land. You know I have waited patiently for you before, Tally, and I'll be waiting for you again. Never doubt that.

I love you, Tally, and I'll take your image to Heaven along with all my memories of what a kind, loving, wonderful wife you've been.

Again, Tally, please do not blame yourself, and if you can, please try to explain to our family and friends why I did this.

I love you more than life itself, Tally.

With all my love,

Your Zack

THE END

*O Trinity of love and power!
Our brethren shield in danger's hour;
From rock and tempest, fire and foe,
Protect them wheresoe'er they go;
Thus evermore shall rise to Thee
Glad Hymns of praise from land and sea.*

—The U.S. Navy Hymn

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The first and second sections of this book stand on their own historical merits, and those of us who lived it, know it to be true. The third section, "The Aftermath," is based on the following factual events:

In 1977 a VA caseworker in Chicago noticed a correlation between certain types of cancers and Agent Orange. When the VA ignored her findings, she took her information to an investigative TV reporter who made the documentary, "Agent Orange: Vietnam's Deadly Fog," which aired in 1978. Because of the public outcry, the VA empanelled the Agent Orange Study Group, which they chaired with a researcher from the Monsanto Chemical Company, that just so happened to be the manufacturer of Agent Orange. As a result of their blatantly biased study, they maintained their position that Agent Orange had only short-term and reversible effects on human life. This put them at odds with the EPA who stated that scientific research proved just the opposite. The VA rewarded the whistleblower by transferring her from place to place until she finally got tired of it, and quit.

In 1992, the Agent Orange Act was passed granting compensation for certain diseases thought to be Agent Orange related, to members of all branches of the military that had been awarded the Vietnam Service Medal.

In the late 1990's, Australian scientists noticed that Navy Vets who served on the South China Sea had much higher rates of cancer than troops stationed on land. They discovered that the inshore waters had

been contaminated with Agent Orange from coastal run-off and that the desalinating process concentrated the Dioxin in their ships' water supplies. Needless to say, we, as well as the Aussie sailors, drank, showered, cooked, and washed our clothes in that poisonous water every day.

When presented with the Australian study, the American VA and Department of Defense refused to recognize its validity, or for that matter, wouldn't even acknowledge the fact that naval warships desalinated seawater. The Australians immediately came to the aid of their sick Naval Vets, but all existing benefits for our own Blue Water Navy Veterans were about to be taken away from them, not by Congress, but by the VA.

In a major shift to save money in 2002, the VA "Reinterpreted" the Congressional 1992 Agent Orange Act to mean that anyone with the "Presumption of exposure to Agent Orange" must have had their "Feet on the ground of Vietnam," or they must be able to prove they had been in "Brown or inland waters," as arbitrarily defined by the VA. This radical change in policy effectively cut off every Blue Water Navy Vet from any and all Agent Orange compensation. As in my novel, they did this by putting the changes that defrauded this entire class of vets into their, "2002 M-21-1 Adjudication Manual." Interestingly, Congress has never mentioned one word about how the intent of their law had been perverted by the VA.

To show you how unfair this ruling is, troops who changed flights in Saigon, no matter how brief the layover, had their "Feet on the ground," and were, therefore, eligible for Agent Orange compensation, whereas a coxswain with cancer who served on the USS Mahan DLG 11 and actually brought the motor Whaleboat over to a dock in 'Nam to pick up supplies was denied coverage because his feet touched the pier, not the GROUND!

In researching this book, I was unable to find definitive numbers of how many Army and Marine Vets were employed by the VA when the law was "reinterpreted," however, I'd be willing to bet they severely outnumbered Naval Vets. The VA had a slogan at the time, "Veterans working for veterans," but they certainly weren't working for us. Had there been a like

number of Navy Vets employed there, you can be sure this never would have happened. Of course, there are rivalries between all branches of the military but none compares to the fractious relationship that exists between the Navy and Marine Corps.

Just to give one personal example, I stopped at a motel for the night in Sheridan, Wyoming. A pickup truck parked next to mine. An old guy was bringing suitcases into his room. I noticed a set of dog tags hanging from the rear view mirror. Assuming they were his son's, or grandson's, I asked who they belonged to. "Me," my new neighbor replied. I asked him which branch of the service he was in. "The Marines in Vietnam," he said proudly.

I told him I had been in the Navy there, also. His expression darkened, and he told me, "I have respect for some of you..."

I thought things were going rather well until he continued, "... the corpsmen assigned to our units joined the Navy just like all the rest of you to dodge the draft and sit out the war on nice cozy ships eating good food, sleeping in comfy beds, but instead they got sent to our squads and were forced to come with us and get shot at in the jungle. Boy, were they surprised."

He was misinformed. Corpsmen serving with Marine units volunteered, but I said nothing about that. Instead I mentioned the fact that our eight and five-inch guns saved many lives, and many ground units. He said emphatically with a scowl, "Not ours. The Navy never helped us. We were too far inland." At that point, he conspicuously took a pistol out of the cab and gave me a dirty look as he went into his room.

You can hear this same tale every night in every VFW Post and American Legion Hall across the country. All it takes is a few drinks and these guys relive the glory days when Marines were warriors and sailors were pussies. The reality is that for every grunt on patrol in the jungle, there were a dozen or more rear echelon support troops living in relative comfort behind the wire with nice nine-to-five jobs, drinking beer every night after work. Fifty years later you ask them about their military service and they all claim they

were “Rambos,” sneaking around the bush taking VC ears. In the American Legion Halls they proudly relive memories they never had. It’s like the old joke: there were less than twelve hundred Navy Seals in Vietnam, and I’ve met all thirty-thousand of them. For all I know, my motel neighbor might have been a mechanic in the Da Nang motor pool.

And if you think that is far fetched, consider this: in the 2000 Census four out of five of those who claimed to be Vietnam Veterans were IMPOSTERS!

In creating the character “Lance Corporal Boudreau,” I wanted to put a personal face and motive on the VA’s disenfranchising of the Blue Water Navy. We’ll never know what happened behind those closed doors but when important policy matters are to be decided there is usually an “Alpha Dog” that dominates and leads the pack. It is not out of the question that one such as Boudreau brought it all about.

So, since 2002, Blue Water Vietnam Vets are unable to get compensation for life threatening diseases that are service connected unless they stepped on land, or can prove they served on inland waterways. Meanwhile, the VA actually awards financial compensation to Iraq and Afghan War vets for their hemorrhoids.

The ending of “The Aftermath” has been fictionalized but is nevertheless God’s honest truth. I have spent the last six years helping seriously ill vets who have been plagued with various conditions and cancers, some dating back to their military discharges. I have seen and felt their angst and frustration, as every avenue of hope was closed off to them. When they become too sick to work, their families slowly lose all of their assets due to the cost of co-pays, transportation, and other factors.

John Rossie of Bluewaternavy.org has spent more than ten years, unselfishly, and so far, unsuccessfully spearheading the effort to have this cruel interpretation of Congressional law changed. He has seen far too many suicides with ropes, guns and pills by sick Naval Vets who rightly or wrongly decided to spare their families the further emotional and financial pain of

what they saw as a futile situation. Whether by cancer or their own hand, they all die in frustration and despair, and the VA's neglect is undeniably the root cause. The VA has dishonored our Vietnam Naval Service every bit as much as the anti-war protesters did so long ago.

I can only hope this book inspires you to get on the phone with your Congressmen and Senators to help us get this situation corrected.

And please, when you meet one of us don't say, "Thank you for your service." Talk is cheap, and until the day comes, if it ever does, when so called Blue Water Naval Agent Orange Veterans finally have treatment and compensation equal to other branches of the service, no words aggravate us more.

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I'd like to give my heartfelt thanks to everyone who helped shape this story and especially the following individuals:

To Carl Harstad, who was denied benefits because his many cancers occurred from exposure in Da Nang Harbor, which the VA refuses to admit is "Inland Waters." Fair weather, and following seas, Carl.

To Ollie Carlson who was jerked around by the VA in Arizona, while they waited for him to die from his cancer. Through the intervention of his Congressman, he was finally awarded compensation, but went into a coma on the very day he received it, and died two weeks later.

To Karl and Maryann Busch, who can tell you just how unfair the VA can be. Even when their own protocols say you're right, they can still arbitrarily deny you compensation.

To Larry J. Howes, who made the mistake of having clogged arteries in his legs instead of his heart. The VA would have paid for the heart, but not for his legs.

To James Howes, son of Larry J, a Boatswain's Mate, who was commissioned an officer, and helped me with technical matters. He may have retired as an officer, but once a boatswain, always a boatswain.

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To my brother Scott, who pokes fun at me for “tilting at windmills” even though I have shown him time and time again, that if you charge them hard enough and often enough, you CAN knock them down.

To my uncle and author, Jule A. Miller, who encouraged me to write this story.

To John Rossie of Bluewaternavy.org, who has spent the last ten years fighting to get Congress to do the right thing and pass a new Agent Orange bill that would include the NAVY. God bless, and keep tilting, John.

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To Shari Miller who aided and abetted me for many years in assisting sick Naval Vets with their claims. Her encouragement also helped me to write the first copy of this book.

And to the Good Lord, without Whom I could never have written a single word of this.

Thank you all so very much,
Randy Miller

GLOSSARY A

Vermont to English Translation.

Aboahd, aboard	boilahs, boilers
Aftah, after	cayah, care
Ah, are	centah, center
Ahms, arms	chahge, charge
ahn't, aren't	chohds, chords
ahticle, article	choppahs, corn choppers, helicopters, motorcycles, or teeth
anchah, anchor	cleayah, clear
anothah, another	colah, color
ansah, answer	couhse, course
anywheah, anywhere	covah, cover
apaht, apart	crittah, critter
ashowah, ashore	deah, dear
ayup, yes	destroyah, destroyer
bahn, barn	doowahs, doors
befo', before	eithah, either
bettah, better	entiah, entire
biggah, bigger	evah, ever
binoculahs, binoculars	evahthin', everything
bohn, born	extry, extra
boad, board	fah, far
boahdin' pahties, boarding parties	fahm, farm
Boilah Tendahs, Boiler Tenders	

fathah, father
figyah, figure
fiyah, fire
flatlandah, flatlander
Flowida, Florida
fo', for or four
fo'casle, forecastle
fohty, forty
fohce, force
fum, from
fust, first
goin'ta, going to
gunnah, gunner
hahd, hard
heah, here or hear
heahd, heard
heaht, heart
houahs, hours
hunded, hundred
huht, hurt
inasection, intersection
ja'heads, Marines
labah, labor
latah, later
launchah, launcher
lettahs, letters
levahs, lever
libity, liberty
lobstah, lobster
mahk, mark
mahket, market

Mahtin, Martin
messengah, messenger
mistah, mister
mo', more
mooah, moor
motah, motor
mufflah, muffler
nachah, nature
neighbahs, neighbors
neithah, neither
nevah, never
New Hampshiah, New Hampshire
odah, order
officah, officer
othah, other
ouah, our
outta, out of
ovah, over
owah, or
pacent, percent
paht, part
pahties, parties
paiah, pair
Palmah, Palmer
papah, paper
poblem, problem
poht, port
Pohtsmouth, Portsmouth,
pooah, poor
powdah, powder
powhed, powered

proctah, proctor
professah, professor
puhple, purple
quatahs, quarters
Rabbit, Robert
radah, radar
regulah, regular
remembah, remember
richah, richer
ruddah, rudder
scahed, scared
shuah, sure
sistah, sister
smaht, smart
soljahs, soldiers
soonah, sooner
spreadahs, manure spreaders
squahed, squared
stahbahd, starboard
stahched, starched
staht, start
steeah, steer
sugah, suger
talkah, talker
tempah, temper
tempatuah, temperature
themometah, thermometer
thew, threw

theyah, their or there
they'ah, they are
thihd, third
thihty, thirty
togethah, together
tractah, tractor
tuhn, turn
undah, under
undahstand, understand
undahway, underway
Vamont, Vermont
wah, war
wahm, warm
watah, water
wheah, where
weathah, weather
whethah whether
wiah, wire
wintah, winter
wipah, wiper
wisht, wished
wohd, word
wohk, work
wohld, world
wohse, worse
yeahs, years
youah, your
you'ah, you are

GLOSSARY B

Clarification of Words, Terms,
and Slang Commonly Used by the U.S. Navy in Vietnam.

Aft, to the back of a ship

Amidships, a location. The middle part of a ship

Amidships, a steering command. An order to line up the rudder with the centerline of a ship

ARVN, Army of the Republic of [South] Vietnam

Bay, first body of protected water inland from the sea

Beaucoup, many or more

Binnacle, bridge compass housing

Boatswain's Locker, a space below the forecastle where all of the apes' tools and supplies were kept

Bollard, a large post on a wharf or ship used for tying off lines

Breach, hole

Breech, the rearmost part of a gun, directly behind the chamber, where shells and powder are loaded

Bridge, ship's nerve center or brain

Bridge wings, spaces on both sides of bridge open to the weather

Bridge wing break, forward part of the bridge wings

Bulkhead, wall

Butt can, ashtray

Captain's Mast, the Captain adjudicates cases and administers punishment to those of his crew who have been charged with various infractions and crimes

Chart, map

Chart House, a space below the bridge where all of the ship's charts and the chronograph were kept

CIC or Combat Information Center, location of Radar Division's equipment

CO, Commanding Officer

Compartment, berthing space

Coxswain, small boat driver

Davits, mechanical devices used to launch and retrieve small boats from a ship.

Deck, floor

Deck Apes, ship's grunts

Dogs, a group of evenly spaced levers used to tighten down a watertight door

Doodly-Squat or sometimes Squat, or Diddly-Squat, anything or nothing

Draft, portion of a ship that is underwater

Estuary, place where fresh and salt water meet

Exfiltrate, to escape furtively from an area under enemy control

Fantail, back of a ship

Fathoms, a measurement: one fathom equals six feet

Flank speed, top speed

Flatlander, someone who comes from 'away' or someplace other than Vermont

Flattop, slang for aircraft carriers

Fluoroscope, takes X-rays of the body that can be viewed directly on a screen

Forecastle, bow of a ship

Forward, to the front of a ship

Forward break, watertight doors set aft of the forecastle on both the port and starboard sides to keep large waves from washing over the main deck

Grunts, those on the lower end of the enlisted hierarchy who do all the dirty and dangerous work

GQ, General Quarters

Gun Bore, measured by the diameter of the shell it fires in inches

- Gun Captain, person who fires the shells, and is in charge of the gun crew during GQ
- Harbor, protected body of water inland from a bay
- Hawser, thick rope measured by its diameter in inches
- Hawespipe, a steel pipe through which an anchor chain must pass
- Head, bathroom
- Heave-to, come to a stop
- Helm, ship's steering wheel
- Ho Chi Minh, the Communist president of North Vietnam
- Hold, cargo space
- Honker, big wave
- Hook, anchor
- Junk, an Asian boat with a curved hull, horseshoe shaped stern, and interior bulkheads added for strength
- Kapok life jacket, those produced during World War Two and used on ships in Vietnam were stuffed with the dried fibers of domestic milkweed pods.
- Knock-off, cessation of work
- Knot, nautical miles [2000 yards] per hour
- KIA, killed in action
- Landfall, first visual sighting of land
- Lashed, tied
- Lay-to, come to a stop
- Leave, receiving permission to go ashore for extended periods of time
- Lee Helm or EOT, ship's gas pedal
- Liberty or "Going on the Beach," receiving permission to go ashore for up to 72 hours
- Lifeline, a line attached to stanchions running above the decks to give sailors something to grab ahold of to keep from getting washed overboard
- Line, rope measured in inches by diameter

Magazine, places where gunpowder and projectiles are stored, however, for safety reasons they each have their own spaces and are never kept together

Make fast, to tie up

Mess Cooks, the cook's helpers

Mid-Watch or the Midnight-Watch, took place from 0000 to 0400 hundred hours

Moor, to anchor, or secure a ship to a fixed mooring buoy, or tie a vessel to a pier

Mosh Skosh, real fast!

Mount Captain, the Gunner's Mate responsible for the mechanical performance of the guns and magazines during GQ

Mount fifty-one, forward guns

Mount fifty-two, aft guns

Nautical Mile, 2,000 yards

NCO, Non Commissioned Officer

NVA, North Vietnam Army

Oiler, a ship that provides fuel to the fleet

OOD, Officer of the Deck, or conning officer

ONI, Office of Naval Investigation

Overhead, ceiling

Party line, telephone line shared with several other nosy neighbors who can all listen in on each other's calls

Passgeway, hallway

Port, left

POW, Petty Officer of the Watch

QM, Quartermaster

Quarters, morning head count and work assignments

Quarters, a berthing compartment

Quasimodo, the Hunchback of Notre Dame

Rack, bed

Reefer, a ship that provides food to the fleet

- Salvo, more than one gun firing simultaneously
- Sampan, flat bottomed Chinese style boat often used to transport goods
- Sapper, an explosives expert
- Scope, a nautical term referring to the length of chain between a submerged anchor and its ship
- Screw, propeller
- Scuttlebutt, rumors and gossip
- Song, means river in Vietnamese
- Squat, see Doodly-Squat
- Squid, slang for sailor
- Stanchion, upright post
- Starboard, right
- Steam/steaming/steamed, ship traveling at sea
- Superstructure, part of a ship above the main deck
- Swab, the act of mopping
- Tagalog, native Filipino [a man] or native Filipina [a woman]
- Tagalog, native Filipino language and culture
- Tet, the Vietnamese Lunar New Year
- Topside, above main deck, outside
- Turn-to, work
- Two-track, an overgrown, seldom used rural road showing only a set of tire marks going through the vegetation
- Underway, ship going somewhere at sea
- Vector, angle or trajectory
- VC, Viet Cong
- Wardroom, officer's dining room, traditionally used as a hospital during combat
- Watertight door, a door sealed by dogs or a wheel
- Wire, steel cable
- Yeomen, clerks and office workers

FINAL LEGISLATIVE OUTCOME:

The Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2019.

In 2010, quite by accident, I came across a VA list of “Blue Water Ships that operated in Brown Water.” The crews of these ships would be eligible for compensation for Agent Orange poisoning. I was astonished and disappointed that my first destroyer, the USS Rowan DD 782 was not on it. During her deployment to Vietnam, I was a deck ape and a Quartermaster, so I knew exactly where we had been, and I became determined to get my sick shipmates the compensation they so desperately needed. From the National Archives I got copies of all the log entries and with them in hand, made the case that Qui Nhon Harbor should be considered “Inland Waters.” At the time, Jim Sampsel was in charge of picking which bodies of water would be chosen. He agreed with me and sent my work over to the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs who also concurred and put the Rowan on the list.

As a result, various ships’ organizations began sending Veterans to me for help with their claims. I will tell you this: I saw a lot of sad. A whole lot of sad. Some I could help and some I couldn’t, but it marked me. These were my brothers, and they and their families were in the worst possible shape anyone can ever be in.

Using my Qui Nhon argument as a wedge, Procopio, an Agent Orange riddled Vet who had been on an aircraft carrier anchored in Da Nang Harbor [and it is ironic that our government has given millions of dollars to Da Nang to clean up their contaminated waters, but refused to give a sick sailor so much as a dime] fought his carrier’s lack of inclusion all the way up through the Federal Court system. When his case ended up in the Appellate Court, they tossed it back to the VA saying the list was capricious and inconsistent because it included Qui Nhon and not Da Nang.

Qui Nhon was so small and narrow; it precluded entry to any ships larger than destroyers. Not so Da Nang which was by far the largest harbor in all of 'Nam and the thought of having to cover the thousands of sailors on all of the carriers and cruisers that had ever anchored there had the VA bean counters shaking in their boots. So the VA's solution was to remove ALL bays and harbors from their list and that made the court happy because now everyone got screwed equally. As this was playing out, the VA decided they needed a scapegoat for the whole debacle and who better than Jim Sampsel? They quickly exiled him from his fellow swamp creatures in Washington DC and he was transferred to the hinterlands of Ohio.

However Procopio was anything but a quitter and challenged the new ruling and this time the high court sided with him. The Supremes were going to rightly revert back to the original 1992 Congressional Law: anyone with a Vietnam Service Medal and a signature Agent Orange disease would be eligible for compensation. Keep in mind that for the 3 years or so that this bill kept being brought up, it stalled repeatedly solely because of cost. A "Bridge to nowhere" for their districts was fine, but helping a cancer stricken vet was absolutely out of the question.

Once the High Court announced their decision, the VA gave up. They would no longer challenge the ruling. Now that the spotlight of public scrutiny was on the one-hundred-sixteenth Congress, they immediately passed a bill that was crafted to make them appear concerned and proactive while at the same time, saving them a fortune by preempting the Supreme Court. Those who read the small print quickly learned that the new law requires claimants to PROVE their ships came within 12 miles of land, which is definitely going to cause a great hardships for a lot of sick guys who won't have a clue how to do that, and I will tell you this: the Agent Orange contaminated waters of the monsoon runoff extended far beyond the 12 mile territorial limit.

So, once again, the burden of proof is on us using different but no less difficult standards. The way it stands now, affected Naval Veterans must

Randy Miller

obtain copies of all their ships' logs, which is not easily accomplished, nor is it cheap, then find someone who can plot the myriads of latitudes and longitudes contained therein on Vietnamese charts for them. Imagine trying to do this while you are getting chemo or radiation after finding out you are terminally ill.

The moral of the story is this: there are more clowns in the 2019 Congress than there ever were in the Ringling Brothers' Circus. History will judge these buffoons on this bill and all their other dirty deeds as well. I doubt the verdict will be kind.

Randy Miller

7 January 2020

