

이십삼

Chapter Twenty-Three

Back at Ft. Jackson, the new AIT training cycle had already begun—new NCOs from Ft. Benning and new trainees fresh from Basic—and I couldn't get out of there fast enough. I grabbed my deployment orders from the company clerk and didn't open them till I'd gotten into a cab at the Main Gate.

APO San Francisco, I discovered, flipping the pages of my stapled orders as the cab made its way to the airport. I'd be flying out of Oakland Army Terminal, assigned to the 101st Airborne Division in Vietnam.

My first stop was Canandaigua, and I have absolutely no memory of the two days I spent there, save for the fact that my mother was so ill the morning I left she couldn't get down-stairs.

The Old Man was mostly silent on the way to the Rochester airport, and I was grateful. Nothing in his experience as a Navy pilot in World War II remotely resembled ground operations in Southeast Asia, so what were we going to talk about?

I wasn't particularly worried about getting hit—either your number was up, or it wasn't—but I was petrified at the thought of making a bad decision that might get somebody else killed. There was a steep learning curve for NCOs joining

a unit in the field, and this was very much on my mind.

My flight to San Francisco included a two-hour layover in Denver, and I'd called my sister to let her know. Winnie arrived at the Denver airport with her boyfriend in tow, a bearded guy named Rocky whose existence I'd been aware of but whom I hadn't previously met. He had the grace to disappear and leave us to ourselves.

Winnie was effusive when she found me in the waiting area, but I was preoccupied, and she got quiet when she saw how things were. She dragged me off to get an ice cream cone, something we hadn't done together since we were children. She had the second book of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy in her handbag and impulsively gave it to me to read on the plane. I was already a couple chapters into it by the time I touched down in San Francisco.

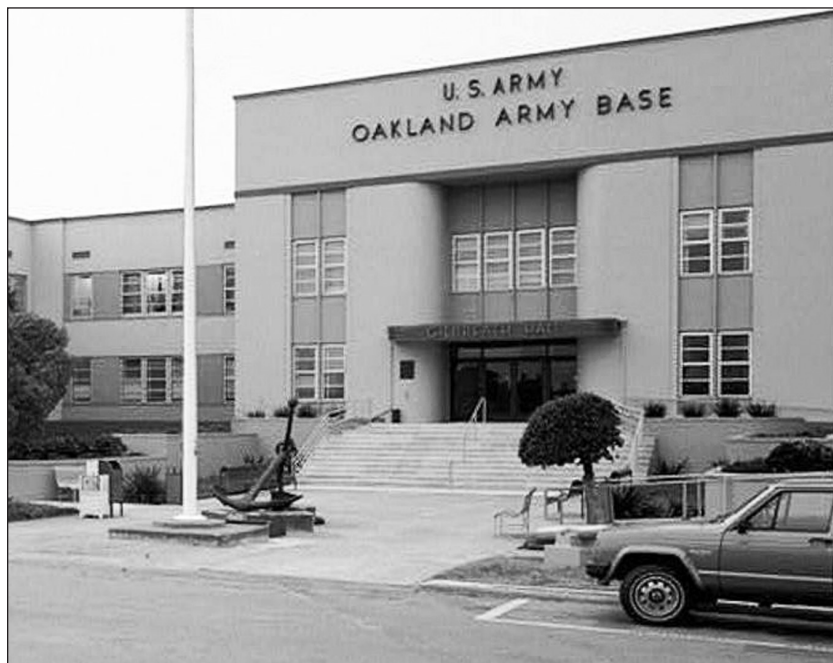
From San Francisco, it was a short taxi ride across the Bay Bridge to the Oakland Army Terminal, and the cab driver didn't need to be told.

"Oakland?" he said, eyeing my dress greens in the mirror. I nodded, and off we went.

"I've actually picked up the *same* guys I drove to the Army Terminal, returning from Vietnam after their tour exactly one year later," he told me, attempting to inject a cheerful note into a somber ride.

A tour was thirteen months, not twelve, but I didn't bother to correct him. We drove to the Main Gate of the Oakland Army Terminal—MPs and protesters everywhere you looked—and he dropped me off. I made my way past the protesters and the MPs and entered the main building.

With more than half a million U.S. troops stationed in



Oakland Army Base, Oakland, California—circa 1969

Vietnam, Oakland was processing upwards of eight hundred GIs a day. I took my spot at the end of the line and dropped my duffel bag on the floor. The line inched along until I finally reached the clerk, who mutely held out his hand for my orders. I handed them over. He scanned them briefly, flipped a few pages, wrote something incomprehensible on the front, and handed them back.

“Next!” he called.

The Oakland Terminal was an enormous place. I was housed with a couple dozen sergeants, and our job was to round up the Army troops for formations—of which there were as many as a dozen per day. Formations began early in

the morning and continued until late in the afternoon. If you heard your name called, you fell out and got into line. When they stopped calling names, the line shouldered its duffel bags and marched off to the airfield. Those who remained filed back to the barracks.

Apart from this, there was absolutely nothing to do. One of the NCOs had some pot with him, and three of us smoked a joint one night out by the massive wall enclosing the terminal. Nobody cared. I spent most of my time with Frodo and Sam, trying to find a way into Mordor.



Oakland Army Terminal Main Gate, with protesters—circa late '60s
(photo courtesy of Estuary Press)



Oakland Army Terminal, Main Gate: Army MPs and Navy Shore Patrol dealing with protester—circa late '60s
(photo courtesy of Estuary Press)

We never saw an officer. Officers were housed separately, they ate separately and traveled separately. For all we knew, they reproduced separately. The Oakland Army Terminal was jammed with enlisted men.

After a couple days, a few of us began to notice that something was screwed up. Guys who'd arrived at Oakland after we had were being called during formations: They were falling out, marching off, and getting onto planes—and it appeared

that we were stuck in some kind of administrative limbo. None of us was in a hurry to ship out, but nobody wanted to be stuck in the Oakland Terminal. We approached a clerk about this, and a look of infinite boredom came over his face.

“When your name is called during formation,” he said tonelessly, “fall out and get into line.”

“*They’re fucking with us!*” said one of the sergeants savagely when we got back inside the barracks, but this was a common complaint in an organization where no one ever told you anything.

Nobody had the energy to get worked up about it, and I went back to Tolkien—where the Ring Bearer and his companion had found the Black Gate closed and were attempting to scale the cliffs of Minas Morgul.

On our third day at Oakland, in the final formation just before sunset, they suddenly called our names. We got into line and marched toward the gigantic air terminal, everybody’s pulse quickening, our duffel bags over our shoulders.

Inside the terminal building we were sequestered by planeload, segregated from several other planeloads, each group numbering roughly a hundred and fifty GIs. When our plane arrived, we moved out onto the tarmac and watched as the giant C-141 taxied to a stop. The ground crew strolled out to service the plane, mingling with the front of the line—and word suddenly spread like wildfire that we weren’t going to Vietnam. The NCOs were at the back of the line, and we were the last to hear this. My first impulse was to dismiss it—wild, unsubstantiated rumors being the waters we swam in.

“Hey, check this out,” said one of the sergeants, and we turned to see a captain walking briskly toward us from the

tower, holding a large manila envelope.

He halted in front of our group, eyed us briefly, then handed the manila envelope to the senior NCO present, a master sergeant conspicuous by the three rocker arms below his sergeant's stripes.

"Do NOT open this until the plane lifts off," he said.

Everybody had forgotten to salute. We stood there gaping at him as he turned to go.

"Hey, where're we going?" blurted one of the NCOs, entirely omitting the obligatory "sir."

The captain turned back. "I can't tell you where you're going," he said—and he pointed at the master sergeant: "Don't open those orders until you lift off."

"We going to Vietnam?" asked another sergeant.

We had a dialogue going now, and we weren't going to let this guy go till we got some answers out of him.

He eyed us for a moment, considering briefly.

"This plane, in fact, is NOT headed to Vietnam," he said, and turning on his heel he strode back to the tower.

No one else among the enlisted men had heard this exchange, but everybody had witnessed the manila envelope being passed to the master sergeant. The line buzzed wildly, as the doors were thrown open and the plane began to board.

The NCOs were the last to board and, hence, we occupied the front of the airplane.

"*OPEN THE ORDERS!*" somebody yelled, and suddenly everybody was yelling as the doors of the plane were shut and locked down.

"Can't open the orders until the plane lifts off," said the master sergeant weakly—who, as it turns out, was an Army

cook. He was still seated, his voice didn't carry very far, and this, together with his complete lack of command presence, did nothing to halt the yelling.

The C-141 engines began to scream, the big jet transport began to move, and we found ourselves taxiing into a takeoff position—no waiting line at a military airfield.

The din inside the plane was now deafening: "*OPEN THE FUCKING ORDERS!*"

As the plane rocked at the head of the runway and the engines rose in pitch, the cockpit door in front of us suddenly opened. One of the flight officers stuck his head out, took a quick look at the anarchic mass of shouting GIs, then hurriedly slammed the door and bolted it.

The NCO sitting next to me jumped to his feet and bel-lowed back into the crowd: "*WE CAN'T OPEN THE FUCKING ORDERS TILL THE PLANE LIFTS OFF!*"

This quieted the yelling momentarily—the sound replaced by the engines building to a shriek. The brakes suddenly released, and the jet transport began to hurtle down the runway.

Everybody felt the wheels come off the tarmac, and the yelling immediately recommenced. The master sergeant looked at us questioningly.

"*Open those fucking orders,*" said the NCO sitting next to me.

The master sergeant shuffled to his feet and began fumbling with the seal on the manila envelope, a pantomime of clumsiness and ineptitude.

The entire plane waited agonizingly as he finally broke the seal and extracted the orders . . . then waited longer as he stared dumbly at the mimeographed page of military

hieroglyphics in his hand.

An auditory wall of abuse hit us like a physical blow and, being seated on the aisle nearest to him, I stood up.

“*Let me,*” I said, and he handed the orders to me, while I quickly skimmed to the bottom of the page and spotted the APO number.

“*KIMPO AIR BASE . . . REPUBLIC OF KOREA,*” I read aloud.

There was a sudden and absolute silence inside the C-141—then a lone voice spoke up from the back of the plane.

“*KOREA! Where in the fuck is KOREA?*”