

삼심

Chapter Thirty

For the next four months, my life revolved around the TOC (Tactical Operations Center) on the DMZ. I was in steady rotation with two other NCOs, each of us pulling a twenty-four-hour shift, with forty-eight hours off until the next shift. This took a little getting used to but, once begun, quickly became a sort of biorhythm for guys in their early twenties fueled by adrenaline.

The days were tedious, fighting to stay awake doing hourly radio checks with the guard towers, the forward bunkers, the Recon Platoon, and whatever patrols might be out in our sector. Nothing stirred during the day.

At night, it was different; at night, the whole place came alive—the DMZ, in effect, becoming a free-fire zone. A sudden eruption of distant gunfire off to the east, where the ROK (Republic of Korea) Army held the adjoining sector, and you'd know that somebody was in the shit, that the North Koreans had extended a probe just a little too far and gotten caught—the hand of Kim Il Sung visible in the last year of his effort to push the Americans off the Korean peninsula.

We didn't patrol the DMZ at night: At night, the Americans pulled in their horns and hunkered down along the Barrier



Foxhole position, looking north from the Barrier Fence, American Sector, 2nd Battalion/38th Infantry/2nd Infantry Division, DMZ/Korea—1970

Fence—our two reinforced bunkers out in the middle of the DMZ becoming LPs (Listening Posts). Not so the North Koreans. Like Native American warriors in the Old West, the North Koreans seemed to value “counting coup” (the idea that if they got within spitting distance of the enemy it was somehow worth points), and they did this repeatedly. At night, they’d send patrols south across the MDL (Military Demarcation Line)—a blatant provoca-

tion and an act of war—penetrating into South Korea’s portion of the DMZ and approaching the Barrier Fence as close as they dared. There, they would carefully sight in and watch, waiting to see if somebody was idiot enough to light a cigarette in the open.

When they were discovered, a deafening light show would erupt—golden streams of tracer rounds from M16s and M60s arcing out into the DMZ and the winking muzzle flash and stuttering rip of AK-47s emptying an entire banana clip back at our position. On one such occasion, in one of the two big firefights that occurred that summer, a buddy of mine from NCO Academy, now a squad leader in one of the line companies, led a dawn patrol to engage or capture any North Korean troops remaining after daylight, and he followed a blood trail all the way to the MDL. The North Koreans unfailingly



Barrier Fence at the southern boundary of the DMZ—circa 1969



Sgt. Winship, TOC (Tactical Operations Center), DMZ/Korea—1970

dragged their dead or wounded back north.

When an incident occurred, whether a full-scale firefight or simply one of the forward bunkers hearing a North Korean patrol move past their position, the NCO manning the Tactical Operations Center was charged with coordinating all available intelligence, by radio and landline, and orchestrating the engagement—until the moment the Battalion CO came through the door. I remember nights with the Battalion Commander glued to my shoulder, his voice in my ear, both of us peering at the maps, reports coming in from all points, the PRC 25 handset slippery with sweat, as I rattled off coordinates as fast as my tongue could frame them, to the sound of automatic weapons fire outside the TOC bunker. After one such incident, the rising sun revealed General Michaelis (Commander, U.S. Forces in Korea) standing uneasily next to our Battalion CO at the Barrier Fence, gazing north. The Pentagon was highly concerned that events on the DMZ *not* escalate into a full-blown conflict, what with Vietnam going at a full boil elsewhere in the neighborhood. We were forbidden to write about anything that took place in the DMZ, and our mail was censored—the American press being kept completely in the dark.

Each NCO had an assistant, an enlisted guy, to help him pull his TOC shift, and my guy was a good-natured, monosyllabic PFC who was a little slow on the uptake. It took him a couple moments to figure things out and a moment more to translate this into speech—not an ideal skill set for the Tactical Operations Center. As a result, I simply took over communications as soon as the sun dropped and didn't relinquish the radio handset until it was full daylight again, turning into a zombie for the remainder of the shift.

It was at this point in my tour that I discovered speed,

available from the ringleaders in the Headquarters Company hooch, who acquired it from an overweight Mess sergeant with a prescription for diet pills. These came in the form of “white crosses” (Dexedrine) and “Christmas trees”—the latter a green-and-white capsule that produced a glorious buzz and fueled me through my TOC shifts, chain-smoking Winstons and bullshitting with the guys in the Recon Platoon, who were likewise strangers to sleep.

The NCOs who ran the Tactical Operations Center were exempt from formations and any other extraneous duty. During our forty-eight-hour break, we were free to do whatever we wanted: go to the NCO Club, for instance, and get shit-faced drunk, obsessively feeding an entire month’s pay into the one-armed bandits while lighting one cigarette off another. The charms of the NCO Club at Camp Young quickly paled, however, and I found myself, once again, drawn to the villages.

Steve Rothstein, the Lead Medic, routinely headed into the villages on weekdays, stopping both in Changpa-ri and Nullo-ri, and I began going with him. At this point, he’d effectively replaced the local doctor and, on his own initiative, was handling emergency first aid with a little minor surgery thrown in. The word would immediately spread as soon as the Medic jeep entered the village, and by the time we stopped, the vehicle would be surrounded by mothers dragging children, older people gathering, everybody babbling at Steve—who’d calmly step out with his medical bag. There was a canvas awning, a sort of open-ended medical tent that extended from the back of the jeep, which I’d help him set up.

The larger of the two villages, Changpa-ri, a bustling hamlet of shops, bars and brothels, lay immediately across the



Spc-5 Steve Rothstein, running "Sick Call" in the village of Nullo-ri, South Korea—1970

Imjin at the southern end of Libby Bridge. Here, one morning, I saw Anne, the girl who'd arrested my attention three months earlier—intent on some village errand, carrying a bowl of rice or something, I can't remember, but clad in her kimono and sandals, her hair pinned back with a bobby pin, making her way swiftly across the dusty road, the morning sun

slanting across her shoulders as she disappeared into the maze of alleys that led to the business girls' hooches.

"*Hey!*" I said.

"Can we maybe get the awning up before you go chasing women?" inquired Rothstein, standing by the jeep, already inundated by clamoring villagers.

That night, I went back to Changpa-ri to look for her—and found her in one of the bars, standing with a friend, who nudged her. She looked up with a dark-eyed gaze, and we approached each other.

"I met you about three months ago . . . in Nullo-ri," I told her.

"I know," she said.

Over the course of that evening she became my steady girlfriend, and my life in Korea changed.