

Copy writer © William A. Lupton December 2009

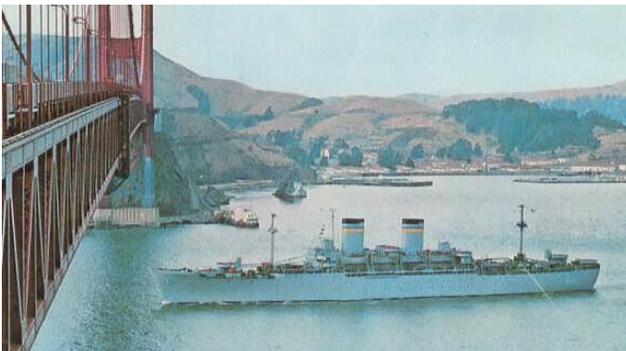
The day after new years, Sergeant Rod tells us to start packing our duffel bags. Everybody knows the Division is going to Vietnam, we just do not know the exact date. The *Honolulu Advisor* runs a front-page story on the 25<sup>th</sup> Division two weeks ago detailing where the first, second, and third brigades are going. For a week, forklifts load wooden packing crates onto large flatbed trucks for shipment; becoming stuck in the mushy ground of the quad in the process.

Everything is packed and ready to go on January 4, 1966, and after noon chow, the two battalions of Wolfhounds assemble their rifles and full field gear in long lines. A detail loads the last large packing crates and connexes onto 18-wheeled flatbeds. We strip our bunks of bedding and fold the mattresses in half to air dry. After the evening meal in the only operating mess hall, we shove the kitchen equipment into the last remaining connex. That is just about it. We wait with our field gear in the middle of the quad as armed MPs guard the four entrances to discourage any last minute desertions.



**Figure 1** Wolfhounds load busses for the trip to Pearl Harbor - 1966.

At 2100, busses file in, and we shuffle into them by platoon. We have to take our gear off, hold our field gear on our laps to sit down, and then wait as the battalion loads the busses. Immediately, the large convoy leaves for Pearl Harbor. There is a lot of hustle and bustle at dockside, but no marching bands, no send off, and no warm and fuzzy speeches to boost our morale. We wrestle our field gear off the bus and grab a duffel bag from the rear of the vehicle. I toil with the heavy bag and hobble into the line where a lieutenant checks off our names from a manifest before we labor with the duffel bag up the gangplank of the USNS Gordon.



**Figure 2** Picture of USNS Gordon leaving San Francisco transporting the 198th Infantry to Vietnam.

I am panting when I reach the top where a sergeant directs us to a staircase. A GI at the head of the stairs tosses each man's duffel bag down the stairwell where yet another GI throws the bag down another flight of stairs. I follow the bag down two decks into our troop compartment. Another man takes the bags and stacks them in the cargo hold then Sergeant LaVilla shows us where we can claim a bunk.



**Figure 3** is a typical troop compartment on the USNS Gordon.

The bunks are five high and spaced very close together. We store our field gear in the bottom bunk and hang our rifles by the slings under the bunk above us; I claim the third bunk for my own. Two others climb the steel riggings to the fourth and fifth berths, and we lie about getting comfortable in our racks for a few hours as the loading process progresses. I eventually nod off to sleep.

I wake up the next morning to the not so gentle roll of the Pacific. As we walk, we have to hold on to something to keep our balance. I grab the doorway that joins the head to the troop compartment; through the door, I find to a row of sinks running the width of the ship. On the other side of the bulkhead where the sinks are lies a string of 12 urinals. Opposite the urinals is a double row of toilet seats, half facing forward, half facing astern, a trough of sloshing seawater washes the poop out both sides of the ship. The toilets are open with no partitions for privacy; the grimy marine smell is one of moldy salt water and corroded metal. Except for the black toilet seats, a monotonous battleship gray is the only color. The ceiling is low, which gives the compartment a cramped and claustrophobic sensation.

I join others in a long snaking line that twists and turns as we slowly shuffle through the narrow passageways. Far from the galley, an evil aroma creeps into the bowels of the ship. It strengthens as we advance then it wafts into a fetid pong when the ship's cooks plop scrambled eggs, toast, bacon, and greasy hash browns onto my tray. A small carton of hard frozen orange juice, milk, and coffee provide some liquids. The milk is fresh for the first week and after that, we get instant milk, which is watery and tasteless. The coffee can kill a horse.

I feel sick to my stomach with the first fork full of powdered eggs. I cannot eat the yellow choler and spit the abomination back onto my tray. "You call this food?" Somebody yells. I wash my mouth out with the milk, eat the unctuous bacon, and then I

manage to swallow the dry over-toasted bread swabbed with grape jelly. The hash browns are not edible either, it is not enough, and this is all I get.

I return to our troop compartment and stare blankly at the urinals with others as we perch on the long row of crappers as seawater sloshes tiny boats of shit and toilet paper back and forth underneath my ass until they finally empty into the ocean.

LaVilla tells me to go topside for the morning formation held on the cramped forward deck, all the while we struggle to find our sea legs as the ship rocks from side to side. As the USNS Gordon bullies its way through the swells we gaze upon the last of the Hawaiian Islands. I summon my childhood memories of watching *Victory at Sea* where the darkened swells roll underneath the TV screen in mesmerizing sequences as wonderful patriotic music brings the black and white seascape to life. The music gives me a sense of sorrow for missing this wonderful adventure, WWII.

Sergeant Letoto reads out a list of men to report to the galley for KP, and I curse when I hear my name called. The mess sergeant assigns me to wash trays where three of us crowd into a cramped little washroom. The troops toss in their dirty trays through a hole in the wall. The first man grabs them, scrapes off the uneaten food into a garbage can, and then quickly throws the tray into a sink where I use a high-pressure hose to wash off the remaining food, scratch off any stubborn particles, and stack the trays into a wash rack. I then shove them into the washing machine. The stainless steel apparatus gives the utensils a good sanitizing for two minutes; the third KP jacks up the opposite door, pulls the rack out, and quickly stacks the steaming trays into a large triple-decker storage container on wheels. When that is full, he rolls the racks to the dining room, retrieves the empty rack, and we commence the whole process over again.

The trays come at us at an enraged pace. We must work quickly to keep the pile at the window to a reasonable accretion. The water is hot, steamy, and greasy, and we work up a sweat very quickly. Our activity leaves a sickening, garbage-strewn wastewater sloshing back and forth in the stainless steel rack before me. I acquire a compulsory fascination with this hypnotizing exhibit as the ship rolls from side to side, up and down, back and forth; I cannot turn my eyes away from this putrid gray water. It is mesmerizing staring into this slop sloshing back and forth, back and forth. After a half an hour of furious activity, the flow of trays diminishes to a trickle, and this leaves more time to scrutinize the water splashing from port to starboard, back and forth, more and more, never ending waves washing over the stainless steel in front of me. Now I start feeling queasy. My eyes invite my stomach to gawk at the gray, ugly mess before me. I...I try to hold it down, for I am going...yep...yep...to...get sick...uuugh! My breakfast ejaculates into the garbage can. The stench of powdered eggs affronts my nostrils, and I retch repeatedly into this disgusting mess; I puke one last time to get the residual out of me, every spasm afterwards produces only painful dry heaves.

I spit the last of the foul tasting bile into the semi-liquid slurry at the bottom of the can. I lean against the stainless steel table with my mouth agape, drooling, as the ship rolls incessantly. I tightly squeeze my eyes shut then wipe away the tears with a dirty towel, still the ship rolls, and rolls, and rolls ad infinitum. Another dry heave convinces me I need something in my stomach, anything will do. I stagger into the dining room where I procure a glass of milk and drink it down. Still my stomach will not cry uncle, and I hustle back into the tray compartment to barf up the milk into the swill.

The ship's intercom announces seasick pills are available on the upper deck, so another KP and I climb the stairs into the fresh salt air where we find a medic dispensing small white Dramamine pills. I take mine back to the mess hall where I swallow the pills with a cup of coffee, hoping my stomach will settle down.

Back in the wash compartment, I am transfixed once more to the sickening gray swill sloshing back and forth, back and forth. I surrender the coffee and Dramamine to the garbage can. Still nauseous, sweating, and feeling weak I give up and go AWOL to our troop compartment where I find five or six others leaning against the bulkhead outside of the head; they are ashen and pale and all have sunken eyes.

Sergeant LaVilla taunts his diluted soldiers, laughing his ass off at their insufferable misery. He is not seasick at all; in fact, he likes it rough, and we are jealous of his good fortune. All of us want to lie down in our bunks and be sick, but we cannot; we must endure the infernal, eternal, never ending rolling of the ship while standing up. Now and again, somebody makes a break for the toilets where a constant stream of seawater washes underneath the seats flushing out turds and once eaten food. The aroma makes me sick again, and I bolt for an open seat, uuugh, only stomach acid dribbles meekly from my mouth, burning sharply my gullet and nose. Sergeant LaVilla laughs his evil sneer then chases us up on deck; I fall against the rail where I look down into the azure blue Pacific swells slipping past the starboard side of our ship. I hear no jingoistic music playing; there is no *Victory at Sea* this day, and... I try to hold it down, I really do, but I find myself...uuughing painfully into the deep blue Pacific. I slide defeated onto the cool steel deck where I recover for several hours. By evening chow, I am able to keep some food down, and the seas in the subsequent days are calm. Eventually, all of us recover from our seasickness, and time passes comfortably in the warm South Pacific sun.

Condemned to pull KP and guard for the entire cruise are the poor saps in the ill-fated troop compartment next to the galley. Now Dyer is among the hapless who slave over the dishwasher, but he has a benefit that most of us will grow to envy: the galley is a cornucopia of fresh food. I am walking out of the galley still hungry after an insipid noon chow; I catch Dyer absconding with an arm full of oranges as he heads for his compartment. He is juggling so many oranges he has trouble carrying all of them and some fall to the floor. "Hey, Dyer, let me I have an orange, will ya? I supplicate eagerly as I walk in his direction.

"Fuck you, Lupton," he replies stooping to pick up one wayward fruit, and then another; finally he disappears into the doorway of his compartment coveting his bounty. "Thanks loads," I think to myself, and here I thought Dyer was a buddy, but I guess not.

Richardson gets on my nerves, and we bicker about little stupid stuff, such as where he should not put his big foot when he climbs up to his bunk, i.e. my face. I shove his foot off the rack, which causes him to come crashing down, and now he is all pissed off. Sergeant LaVilla takes note of these skirmishes, and he and Lieutenant Roth in one of his rare appearances in the troops' quarters, shows some concern. As they assume correctly, there are racial tensions, there always are in this unit. Lieutenant Roth instructs me to let him know whenever something like this happens again. I am not too inclined to depend upon him though. When he leaves for the officers' quarters, I am the one who must stay here; no one is going to be around to save my ass, so it is better to endure the tensions than depend on someone else to protect me.

The weather is pleasant and calm for the rest of the trip. Most everybody lollygags around on deck reading cock-books, some gamble, and others play cards. Now and again, a sergeant will give a class about booby traps or sum such thing, and we have to do PT on the rolling deck, but over all, there is nothing much to do. Sergeant Price tries to teach me Cribbage, but for the life of me, I cannot grasp the game, and I spend most of my time watching flying fish sailing along with the ship, Japanese fishing buoys floating past, and shooting the bullshit. I am always hungry. I am too broke to buy anything in the ship's store, and nobody will lend me even a lousy quarter either. I am sure I lose weight.

We awake on January 19 to find ourselves dropping anchor at Vung Tau. An announcement tells us Navy divers will be throwing hand grenades into the water periodically to discourage VC frogmen, and a gunboat patrols around the Gordon while tugboats churn dirty water as they push our stalwart craft against the floating dock.

After eating breakfast, the company prepares to disembark. Sergeant Gallegos issues us live ammunition; I load 100 rounds into my five M14 magazines. I must carry two hundred rounds of machinegun ammo too, but I am so loaded down with field gear there is no place to put the ammunition. Sergeant LaVilla does not want me to take the rounds out of the boxes and carry them draped across my chest, so I decide to carry them by looping the boxes over my sleeping bag. Humping live ammunition is new to me, and I have no experience dealing with the tormenting pain the weight inflicts upon my scrawny shoulders. I am soon to find out how much vengeance the ammo has to offer.

While standing in the troop compartment loaded with field gear, we get word to get rid of the big knives. We can keep them, but we have to stow them in our packs because the generals do not want the Vietnamese think we are predatory killers in lieu of their liberators from the communists' oppression, and they are loath to send ominous signals to the civilians, or to the Viet Cong propagandists. I unhitch my dive knife from my calf and tuck it into my overloaded backpack.

Just before we begin shuffling through the passageways, the word comes down to sling our rifles upside down. When I do this, my sleeping bag keeps pushing the butt off my shoulder creating just another annoyance I must endure as the weight of the field gear and ammunition begin to take their toll on my shoulder muscles. We come to the stairway where a GI grabs each duffel bag, heaves it up to another man at the head of the staircase then lends us a hand by pushing on our packs as we lumber up the steps. We congregate shortly in a cavernous cargo hold as the line of soldiers file through a big door in the side of the ship onto the floating dock tied beside the Gordon. Secured to the floating dock is a LCM landing craft where we surrender our duffel bags to a GI who passes it down to another GI while we navigate a short ladder into the open hold of the landing craft.



**Figure 4 A Company loads the landing craft at Vung Tau - 1966.**

The LCM's crew packs us like sardines into the gently bouncing boat. I find myself standing in front of Captain Curbow as my shoulders ache from the weight of the machine gun ammo. We stand with our duffel bags in front of us, and I want to rest my backpack on top of the Captain's bag, but I am afraid this will show I am weak, so I suffer the nagging burning as my supraspinatus muscles turn into smoldering mush.

Fortunately, the ride is brief and the coxswain yells just before we hit the beach. We brace for the impact but because the boat is so densely populated, nobody can fall over anyway. The craft hits the beach and the ramp drops to a waiting reception committee of Generals, luminaries, and beautiful Vietnamese girls in Au Dai dresses. D-Day this is not.



**Figure 5 Wolfhound's reception committee Vung Tao - 1966.**

A military band plays a rousing marching song as the company pours out of the landing craft. I loop my duffel bag strap around my left wrist because I keep futzing about to keep my M14 from falling off my right shoulder. It is a labor to drag the bag off the boat and through the treadmill sand. Half way to the trucks, I am tiring quickly but dare not stop to rest as General Weyand looks on. My rifle keeps falling off my shoulder; I struggle mightily with the duffel bag until I reach the back of a line of trucks. As I hoist

my bag up into the truck, Sergeant LaVilla screams at me for letting my rifle fall in the sand. He helps me climb into the truck where there are no more seats available, so exhausted, and frail, I flop on the pile of duffel bags where I can lean back and finally take the weight off my shoulder muscles.

A short delay ensues as the remainder of the battalion disembarks the ship. I am too exhausted to sit up and look around, so I rest my abused shoulders, and partake of what I can see over the top of the truck's tailgate. The convoy starts out with an escort of low flying Heuy gunships circling the line of trucks. This is our first exposure to possible combat and everything grabs our attention. A collective moan emanates from our truck as we ride past a detail of sweaty, shirtless GIs filling sandbags at a small sandy knoll along the road. It is an evil presentiment and we know it. As the convoy passes through villages split by the paved road, clusters of little children wave at our passing, adults just stare blankly; their faces tell us they are not pleased about our arrival.

Shortly, we arrive at the staging area located on the campus of Saigon University. The campus grounds are not like an idyllic American style university, but a paltry group of long, modern two story concrete buildings with gaudy, red, orange, and blue colored panels running the length of the balconies. Eight ARVN families live in the buildings. The landscape sports scattered patches of scraggly weeds and scrub bushes.

Sergeant Rodriguez shows us where to start digging the machine gun's foxhole, and we soon discover the ground is more like concrete than dirt. Unlike the latter generation of entrenching tools, there is no pick opposite the spade and the digging produces a bumper crop of blisters rather than depth. With much resolve, Sergeant Wicker manages to break through the rock-hard clay to softer dirt underneath. We take turns enlarging the hole by digging underneath the hard stuff then gradually widen the opening so four of us can occupy the dig. Somebody else manages to break through the clay to our left to create a small fissure, and we join up the two holes via a short tunnel. This excavation is barely large enough for eight of us.

After we are sufficiently finished with the fighting hole, Sergeant Rodriguez allows us to pair up and use our shelter halves to make two-man pup tents. Do not ask me how, but I am stuck with Richardson. I curse my bad luck even more when he insists on sleeping on the left side where I begin laying my sleeping bag. To avoid a fistfight, I relent because who cares which side of a pup tent you sleep on anyway.

I start digging our personal foxhole in front of the tent. We trade off digging several times, but after a while, Richardson disappears when it comes time for him to dig. I just keep excavating my side deeper until I can stand chest high without hunching down; his side is only a few feet deep, and I swear I will kill him if he tries to usurp my deeper end when mortars begin landing.

The engineers build a latrine for the enlisted men by placing several long plywood packing crates over slit trenches and cutting square toilet holes without the benefit of sanding off the rough edges. After taking my dump, I have to pick tiny splinters out of my ass cheeks. On the other hand, the officer's latrine has regular toilet seats, and I get into a shit storm when I joke with Lieutenant Roth regarding officers having tender asses. He fails to see the humor in this jibe, and Sergeant Dunlap advises me to shut up while the shutting up is still good.

The 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Brigade maintains a wide perimeter in front of our foxholes allowing the division to assemble and acclimatize to the stinky hot weather. On our first

night, Smokey Fell thinks he sees movement to our front. Because of the troops in front of us, we must ask permission to fire our weapons, so Sergeant Dunlap calls on the landline for authorization to fire a mortar flare. Everyone locks and loads their weapons when another position reports more shadows moving. Myself, I cannot see crap but for the remainder of the night we decide to stand double guard. I only get two hours of sack time before Sergeant LaVilla wakes me for my third guard at 0300. I feel as if a fairy-tale creature with a big giant hand is pushing my head back down to the ground. I lean on my elbow and think to myself, "I'll just close my eyes for a second, and then I'll get up," and darn if the next thing I know, Sergeant Dunlap is chewing my ass out for falling back to sleep. "Alright, alright Sarge, I'm going, I'm going," I grouse as I shake my head to throw off the giant hand, and then shuffle over to join the others until 0500. Well past dawn, permission to fire the mortar flare finally comes down from brigade.

I return to my tent and sack out until the sun rises. I eat my c-rations, take a shit, and return to find Richardson still sleeping. I gather up my two canteens and retrieve water from the battalion water trailer, and when I am putting them back into their covers, Richardson wakes up and asks me if I got some water for him. I tell him no. He begins raging and bitching about *me* not getting *him* water as if *I* am obligated to do so. "Hey, fuck you, Richardson, get your own water," I retort to the asshole, "What am I your goddamn aide-de-chump or something? Screw you." He rants and raves some more, all the while threatening to beat my ass. I start looking for somebody else to buddy up with, but everybody is content where he is. Curses, I am stuck with Richardson.

Captain Curbow allows three men from each platoon to have a pass to Ben Hoa. I am broke so that takes care of my chances of going. Sergeant Fitch, Knott, and Bray are the select few to get the afternoon passes. When they return, all three of them tell us their whore stories. "I'm walking along the sidewalk and this girl runs out of a bordello, jumps up, and grabs my hat. If I want it back, she taunts, I have to come into the whorehouse," he laughs, "when I go in there, the girl grabs my hand and drags me behind a curtain where there is a bed, and, well, I cannot say no, can I?" Everybody laughs raucously.

"How much did you pay her?" Fell needs to know. Smokey is older than most of us and has experience with hookers.

"She only wanted two dollars."

"TWO DOLLARS, for a short time, goddamn it, Sarge, where is Sergeant Rodriguez?" Fell looks around eagerly, "I want to go on pass, Sarge!" Damn, we are all pissed off we did not get the chance to go too.

Sergeant Fitch adds with aplomb, "After my piece of ass, I got to talking to those ARVNs while drinking beer. They run the whorehouse, restaurant, and laundry, and they said the 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne guys are always coming there getting boom-boom," he is so confident I get the impression Fitch can make friends with anyone, "Do you remember that movement we had out in front of us our first night here? That was one of the 173<sup>rd</sup> airborne nitwits sneaking down to the whorehouse to visit his girlfriend."

"That is one crazy mofo risking his ass for some pussy," adds Buxton, "we could have shot that dumb bastard," as well we could have.

Sergeant Prine leads an ambush outside of the perimeter. I cannot go because I developed a slight case of walking pneumonia a few days before when the temperature drops around 0300, and I wake up chilly. I keep coughing uncontrollably, especially at

night. The patrol is absent for about an hour when I feel the need to take a piss and walk to the latrine. In the darkness, I see somebody coming toward me, and I challenge the shadow. It is Sergeant Prine. "I thought you were supposed to be on ambush," I ask him.

"We had to abort the ambush," is all he says while walking past me. His reasons are nebulous at best. Other squad leaders pull ambushes every night around the perimeter without incident. It just seems that everything Prine does turns into an abortion.

We pack up all our tents and equipment on the seventh day, and around mid morning, we climb into the duce-and-a-half trucks, which convoy us to the 25<sup>th</sup> Division's new base camp. A daisy chain of helicopters escorts us for the two-hour ride. Along the way are scads of children lining both sides of the route; the smallest ones are naked, the bigger ones dress only in shorts and T-shirts. They stand on the roadside begging with their hands and eyes and smiling coyly through the bilious clouds of powdery dust. Many GIs throw C-ration chewing gum to the kids, and they scramble like mad to retrieve their prize. Sergeant Prine tosses something to them which lands in a pile of debris. A gang of munchkins dive headlong into the refuse pile for what they think is a piece of candy; they all clash together in a great cloud of dust only to fight over a piece of C-ration toilet paper. As the truck roars on, we are laughing our asses off at Prine's audacious stunt. Our jocularly comes to an ominous halt when we pass a large graveyard and watch several gravediggers gouging out a hole with long-handled hoes. It is a portent for A Company's coming year in Vietnam.

Ten miles farther, we pass through a half-decent sized town where the kids do not appear quite so enthusiastic at our arrival and the adults actually face away from us. Several minutes later, we turn into a huge undeveloped field where the convoy breaks up and groups of trucks drive off in different directions. We sit in the mid morning sun as Captain Curbow determines where the company will be. "Hey, Sergeant Wicker, do you know where we are?"

"I saw a sign when we passed through that last village, Lupton. I think it said Cu Chi." Wicker is right, the 25<sup>th</sup> Division establishes its major base camp near the village of Cu Chi.

The truck drives a little further across the open field but stops well short of where we have to go inside the rubber plantation. Supply trucks follow us, and we start unloading heavy wooden crates. Six of us are lugging a heavy-ass crate into the rubber trees when a jeep pulls up and the lieutenant offers to help us with the load. We gratefully hoist the box onto the back of the jeep and follow along as the driver slowly goes where eventually we establish the battalion headquarters.

We unload trucks and carry boxes for several more hours until Lieutenant Roth shows us where the platoon's perimeter lies then we busy ourselves digging foxholes. The ground is similar to the Ben Hoa staging area except not quite so hard. After we chip through the top layer of clay, the digging becomes easier. I have to start all over again when I dig into a nest of red ants. Behind our holes, the machine gun crew builds a tent from two of our ponchos. We lay a third poncho on the ground and the three of us have plenty of room to lie down.

Our first night of guard in this strange place is chilling. The Viet Cong could creep up on us, and we would never know because a millions Fuck-You Frogs chirp endlessly, "Ruck roo, ruck roo, ruck roo," all night long! These noisemakers are actually lizards, but everybody believes they sound like frogs, and the moniker sticks.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Division, Big Red One, secures the area for us, and we dare not shoot because they form a perimeter in front of us just as the 173<sup>rd</sup> did at Ben Hoa. They leave the next day, and for the first time, we are on our own. Someone in first platoon thinks he sees movement in the trees, and Curbow authorizes the 90 millimeter to fire a round. The ear-splitting explosion of the 90's back blast calms everything into a palpable silence, even the Fuck-You Frogs cease chirping. If there was movement in front of us before, there sure is none afterwards.

For the first few days at Cu Chi, orders are not to cut down any rubber trees for bunker materials, lest we be court-marshaled. On the fourth day, Captain Curbow gives us the green light, and we chop down as many rubber trees as needed to build our bunkers. Some of the positions become quite elaborate with large tree trunks used to support ceilings with three layers of sandbags on top.



**Figure 6 Stemas waves from an early bunker in the rubber trees - Cu Chi 1966.**

Lieutenant Roth expresses his anxiety about 2<sup>nd</sup> platoon being designated the reserve platoon while the first and third platoons build and populate the bunker line. Second platoon occupies the area next to the company CP and the supply tent. Beyond the CP lay the mess tent and beyond that is battalion headquarters.

We adjust our position slightly so the road leading to the break in the wire intersects our hootches and bunkers, and our fortifications are parallel to the bunker line. I make a small poncho tent for myself a few feet away from Smokey Fell and Dyer who keep the machine gun with them.

Captain Curbow assembles the company around him and reveals the individuals who get a promotion, and all of the private E2s are now PFC E3s. This is my first promotion in the Army, and I am still the same schmuck at the bottom of the plinth, it merely means I make a few more dollars a month that is all. The captain continues his good news by announcing all of the 11B's qualify for the CIB. People joke that when the nominations for CIBs come out Captain Curbow has to delete the company clerk's name. Combat pay is 65 dollars a month and our payday will be on the first of the month, only

two days away. This news brings a round of good cheer, not that we have any place to spend it though.

I am excited because now I can collect my debt from Baggio. I am always broke in Schofield, and I mean broke, for I am stupid enough to lend money. Baggio approaches me after the December payday; he is in the third platoon, and I do not know him very well. He is an obnoxious New York City WOP speaking his insufferable Brooklyn accent. "Lupton, come 'ere. We walk into the NCOs bunkroom where there is nobody around to hear us. "This ring, that my very own sick mudda gave me, I want you to have it as collateral for a small loan of only fifteen dollars," he tells me with such sad anguish; he proffers me his gold ring. I look at it, but I do not take it from him. "I need fifteen dollars really bad Lupton." I am a sucker. I cannot say no to people who feed on my empathy and agree to loan him fifteen bucks, but I refuse the present from his mudda. I recollect the folksy Kentuckian at the end of basic training who gave me his watch as collateral for a fifteen-dollar loan, swearing up and down he would send me the money when he got home. In essence, I am buying the dick head's watch, but I am too green to realize this. The watch stops working after we graduate basic and both of us are long gone. I am a sap and Baggio knows this. Con men can smell a sucker with only a cursory sniff of the air, and I am weak. I give Baggio my fifteen dollars. "Thank you Lupton, I knew you would help me. I'll repay you the next time we get paid." His gratitude is emotive. I feel I might have just might have made a new friend.

On payday, the company lines up alphabetically by rank. The officers do not need to stand in line; Captain Curbow pays them before everybody else. First Sergeant Letoto is first, the platoon sergeants next, the staff sergeants, buck sergeants, the E4s, the E3s, and then finally E2 privates are the only ones left to be paid.

I stand way behind Sp4 Baggio in the line. After Curbow pays him, Baggio passes me without even a fleeting look in my direction. The prick knows. I stand in line becoming disconcerted, fidgety. I turn to see him waltzing back to the bunker line, and I break ranks to follow him. "Hey, Baggio," I yell as I catch up to him, "I need that money you borrowed from me." The WOP stops and looks at me as if I have the temerity to ask for the return of my own money as he fingers his MPC. I know he does not want to pay me, but I am ready for a punch out to get my dough. He peels off two five dollars bills and scornfully hands them to me. I take them and declare, "Fifteen," I know the cheap prick will welsh on me if I let him, but I am ready, "fifteen dollars, Baggio," I say flatly. He looks at his money, hesitates a second, and then peels off another five-dollar bill. I snatch it from his hand.

"Blow," he says in his vile Brooklyn inflection. I want to punch the jerk off so badly, but I have my fifteen bucks back, and I am satisfied I was not fucked. Now I am especially glad I did not take his mudda's schmaltzy ring.

"Asshole," I call him.

"Fuck you, Lupton," he snarls in return. I trot back to the pay line. Captain Curbow is pissed that I am out of alphabetical order, but I tell him I had a debt to collect, he nods his understanding and counts out my month's pay, all 135 dollars of it, which includes my 65 dollars combat pay.

I find myself sitting next to Sergeant Prine in the latrine, which is merely a canvas fly wrapped around a couple of rubber trees and engineer stakes to simulate privacy. In a

semi circle sits six cut in half 55-gallon drums and lying on top of them is a plywood board with holes cut into it.

A dung beetle catches our attention as it ambles from between two of the cans. He is huge and tank like. These bugs crawl into the cans of shit and role around in the goop covering themselves with so much excrement they are sometimes unable to escape the container.

Six of us lean over our knees mesmerized by this determined little beetle that manages to escape the confines of the barrel. Covered in shit, it cannot walk without falling from side to side. He rolls onto his back then struggles mightily to right himself. It attempts to dry out its wings with a burst of energy, but it cannot do more than buzz in place for a few seconds before it has to rest. Everybody becomes keenly interested in his test flight. Greko and Fell bet to see if he is able to lift off the ground. Before a successful test-flight occurs, Sergeant Prine wipes his ass, stands to pull up his pants, and then deliberately steps on the shit bug. Our Flight of Discovery dies with an audible crunch; a moan rises from the audience. Always one to spoil the fun, Prine negates the wager and wipes the poop-filled carcass from the bottom of his boot. Our amusement over, we swab ourselves and return to the tent area to await the morning formation.