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A group of guys plays poker as we wait for our day to begin. Greco and Fagan are sitting next to each other on a bunk opposite Brooks and Tazlaar. The bunk between them serves as a poker table. Standing behind Brooks and Tazlaar is Buxton. I am lying on my bunk directly across the aisle with my hands behind my head watching the game. Buxton is signaling to Greco what Brooks has in his hand. He is not even subtle. Fagan is in on the scam too, as could be expected. Buxton mouths the words queen and touches his two fingers to his lips in a ridiculous attempt to look insouciant. Greco drops his hand. Fagan follows in his turn; Tazlaar loses the small pot to Brooks who is excited about winning with his queens. Like all gamblers, he feels he is skillful and lucky today.

Brooks gambles all the time, and he loses all the time too. He deals the next hand. Buxton peers nonchalantly into Brooks's hand, signals with two fingers, and then vibrates five fingers. Even I can tell Brooks has a pair of fives. Greco opens with the maximum bet, Brooks and Tazlaar stay in, Fagan raises moderately; Greco throws in, as do the other two. Brooks deals out the cards, puts the deck down, and opens his hand. Greco lifts one eyebrow to see the signal; Buxton flashes three fingers. Fagan just looks up at Buxton without any attempt at subtly, harrumphs his endorsement, and then raises the bet again. Brooksie raises him once more thinking his three fives are sure winners, Tazlaar drops out of the betting. Buxton smiles broadly, Fagan snickers and throws his wager into the growing pile. Brooks looks a bit worried because he thinks the others would have dropped by now. He demurs for a while with grim absorption on his face then he capriciously throws in five bucks of MPC raising the bet to Fagan. Smiles all around from the conspirators, for they know they have suckered the tunicated little Brooks. He is committed now. Fagan drops. Greco raises the pot once again with the remaining money in front of him. His leg is nervously bouncing up and down, twitching, waiting for the kill. Fagan leans back and smiles at Buxton. Buxton can hardly hold in his excitement and begins fidgeting as he stands behind the hapless Brooks. "Call," says Brooks, and he throws in his money, "three fives."

"Ha!" Greco cannot hold in his jubilation any longer or he will burst, "three eights take your three fives!"

"Huh?"

"Read 'em and weep, Brooksie," Greco taunts him as he scoops in the pile of MPC with a big shit-eating grin. I just shake my head. Evil twins Fagan and Buxton exchange smiles and laugh aloud.

"Good hand Greco. You knew to hold in with those eights." Buxton compliments Greco with a simper.

"Yeah, I just had a feeling I could do it." The snicker implied in his response tells it all. Brooks sits there clueless. Tazlaar, who cannot see Buxton, gathers up the cards and begins shuffling them for the next hand.

"Breast your cards," I warn Brooks. My grandmother would tell us kids to breast our cards all the time when we played canasta with her.

"Huh?" The clueless little fuck looks at me.

"I said breast your cards Brooks," I show him what to do. Buxton scowls at me, and I can almost hear him scream "motherfucker" from way under his breath. Fagan is pissed too, Greco sees his golden goose evaporate right in front of his very eyes to an

uninvolved interloper, and he is none too joyful about that either. He knows Brooks will keep gambling even when he is out of money.

“Best keep out of this game, Lupton,” Greco warns me with a flat, threatening tone of voice.

“You guys are scum bags,” I tell them – they know this! Stinkeye is my payback from the three conspirators, clearly, they loath me. Tazlaar turns towards me wondering if I am including him in my invective.

“Hey, fuck you, Lupton,” spits Greco.

“SADDLE OOP,” Sergeant Rod’s war cry sends a collective moan throughout the hootch. Everybody gathers up his field gear, rifles, and ammunition, and we morosely fall into a four rank formation outside of the hootch. We have been screwing around since morning chow, pulling police call, rearranging a few sandbags around the hootch, and reorganizing our gear. It is now time to get on to the duce-and-a-halves and ride to the Division heliport to fly out to war.



Figure 1 2nd Platoon loads the trucks at Cu Chi – 1966.

All forty of us climb into the second truck. There is only enough room for us to stand. “This is like the Mexican Army,” declares Sergeant Rodriguez, “one truck for 10,000 troops.” We laugh at his candor as the two-and-a-half-ton truck slowly starts out for the trip to the chopper pad trailing a huge black plume of diesel fuel exhaust behind us. The driver eases over the drainage ditch on an angle and the truck sways like a surfboard riding a wave. Everybody groans with the motion, but we are still safely standing when the driver shifts gears and gains speed, Cu Chi dust trails us in light tan billowing clouds. We all hold on to the man next to us and shortly we arrive at the chopper pad. Everybody disembarks, and soon we load the helicopters for the ride to LZ Somewhere?

Because I can see Nui Ba Dinh through the starboard door, I know we are heading south and west, and sure enough, we land in a rice paddy close to the Cambodian border. The CA is not hot but it is wet. We jump into five inches of warm stagnant water, wade a few feet from the helicopter, and wait for them to fly off. Nobody lies in the water; we just crouch to maintain our balance against the rotor wash as the choppers fly away. After the ripples subside, the company organizes into a formation to sweep through a

village. The gunships flying overhead advertise our movement by making much noise as we approach the ville. Presumably, the object of our mission is not surprise.



Figure 2 A Company searching hootches near the Cambodian border - 1966.

We search hootches for the remainder of the morning before moving to a staging area to dig our foxholes. The battalion bivouacs here for the next few days, and we will run our operations in the surrounding villages. Trucks from Cu Chi bring out sandbags and rolls of concertina wire for us, even the mess hall joins us to serve hot meals.

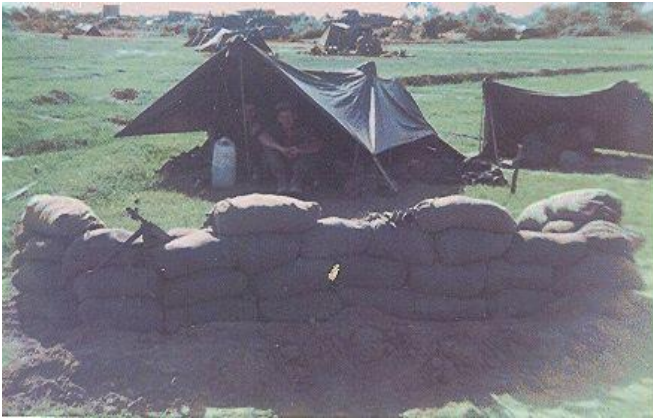


Figure 3 Second Platoon fighting position somewhere near the Cambodian border - 1966.

Sergeant Prine shows us where we need to dig our foxhole. Several of us drag over a bale of sandbags and several hoops of concertina wire from the duce-and-a-half. We labor throughout the rest of the day digging and filling enough bags to construct a wall in front of our machine gun.

It is very hot this afternoon. The digging is tedious, and we sweat much as the labor progresses. The conversation turns to heat stroke, and Rios our medic agrees to send anybody to the rear who passes out from the heat. I cheerfully propose using hyperventilation to faint and make an attempt at this by squatting down into the foxhole and breathing deeply five or six times, and then I stand up and hold my breath. My best effort only produces a dizzy spell and an unhealthy guilt feeling that if I do pass out, and Rios makes a big enough deal out of it, that I will get into a shit storm if I am caught

malingering. Upon reflection, this stunt is not worth the risk. I pass on his invitation, nobody else offers to try, and we resume our foxhole digging. By the end of the afternoon, the hole is four feet deep, and there is room enough for the three of us. The depth of the hole and the height of the wall is enough that we do not have to stoop very much to get our heads below the rim of the bags.

When the heavy rains come this afternoon, everybody scrambles for their shelter-half hootches to keep dry. I climb into my rain suit and attempt to join the other machine gunners under the small poncho hootch but there is not enough room for more than two. I roam the line looking for a dry spot when I peer under a poncho sheltering Miller. He is sitting cross-legged by himself, and I do not even get a chance to ask him if I can come in. "Aw no, not you, Lupton, get outta here." Miller is a fat quintessential asshole. Only a jerk like him would deny shelter to someone in a driving rainstorm, and the rain is now pouring down obliterating any remaining visibility.

"You are an asshole Miller," I shout at him. The splatter on the poncho is so loud I can hardly hear him reply.

"Fuck you, Lupton! Get away from me." I should have kicked his tent pegs out from underneath the dumb bastard or preferably bludgeon him with my M14, but I move on, resigning myself to a wet afternoon. I muse bitterly about how much I dislike this outfit.

An afternoon of rain fills the foxhole with several feet of water, and because I am the only one who is already soaking wet, the other two elect me to bail out our redoubt with my steel pot. I labor until only squishy mud remains then I tell the other two if they want the mud out they need to get down into the hole and start scraping. Both compatriots decline my offer; issue vague threats using many obscenities as they walk back to the small shelter-half hootch for a nap before evening chow.

Sergeant Prine gives us the word to go to chow. I pull out my mess kit, grab my M14, and follow the others to the chow line. "Spread out, spread out," the line has begun to bunch up, "ten feet between each man, ten feet. Come on, you guys should know the drill by now, *one ass-chewing will get you all.*" First Platoon Sergeant Green jokes and cajoles us to lengthen the line so one mortar round wont take out half a squad; the line lengthens by many feet. Our food tastes like shit.

The three of us arrange our guard times; Caldwell stands first guard while Boutoff and I sleep soundly, waking when the VC begins shooting at first platoon's sector of the line with a burst of small arms and mortars. In the dark, I grope desperately for my M14 and web gear. Pop-pop, pop-pop. The bullets fly low over my head, Boutoff has already split, and I am still futzing around in the dark grouping for my helmet. More rounds crack over my head. I think to myself, "Fuck this," and dash for the hole as fast as I can with more bullets following right behind me.

Pop, pop, bullets barely miss my head. If I am going to make it into this hole, I must become Air Borne. Pop-pop... with a flying leap of faith, I jump across the brink of the foxhole. SMASH! My rifle's butt-stock audibly crashes into Boutoff's head. "Goddamn you, Lupton!" Boutoff growls at me. I stagger to maintain my balance. Crack-crack, more fire passes low over our heads. We duck down.

Peeking over the top rim of the sandbags, I see mortar explosions behind our lines. First platoon responds with their machine gun, and I detect the pop then chunk of an M79 grenade launcher several times. Our 81mm mortars are now responding, and

their rounds crash just behind the village tree line where the Viet Cong fired rifles at first platoon. The explosions set a thatched hootch afire, and I can glimpse the light of the blaze flittering through the thick bamboo hedgerow. Eventually, everything settles down as the fires die out.

After the mortars stop firing, we search the blackness before us, searching for movement. I catch a whiff of urine. Turning, I see a darkened shadow skulking in the corner of the foxhole. "Way to go Caldwell," I exclaim, "why don't you go piss outside of the goddamn bunker?"

"Fuck you, Lupton." Everywhere I turn, I get no respect.

After this exchange, Sergeant Prine saunters up to our hole and starts joking about how he had to run for his foxhole in bare feet. "I just got my feet dry when the first rounds started popping over my head. I had mud squishing between my toes..." Then he realizes I am not wearing my helmet; his mood turns acerbic. "Go get your goddamn helmet, Lupton!" He screams at me as if I am a basic trainee. I am infuriated with his shitty comportment. If he could not get his boots on, then how can he expect me to scrounge around in the dark for my stupid helmet when there are bullets cracking all around my person? I begrudgingly climb out of the hole, retrieve my helmet, and return to the foxhole. Just to show how big a prick he is Prine makes me climb back into the hole even though there is no more firing. Some people are born assholes, and they never pass up any good opportunity to reinforce this conclusion. I despise this asshole; we are all happy when he leaves for the platoon CP.

"Ya know Boutoff, you are lucky you found your helmet before I flew into this hole," the absurd silliness of this episode renders me punchy. "I would have knocked your silly ass right out." I giggle wildly recounting the sound of my rifle butt smashing into his helmet. He is such a grump though, and he fails to appreciate his near miss with a large bump on his noggin.

"Fuck you, Lupton." This is all I have heard the entire day. "Fuck you, Lupton," he bitterly scolds me again, "just fuck you!"

"Can I take it you do not want try this run again except without the helmet?"

From the tone of his reply, the answer is no, and you would have thought I intentionally nailed him up side his head on purpose, or something.

In the chow line next morning, we get our asses chewed out again for bunching up. This food is worse than the General Gordon's is. The bread is full of weevils and other small bugs, and the powdered eggs taste unpalatable. If I make a sandwich out of my eggs and bacon, and I load on a lot of salt and pepper, it tastes passable. Only the strong GI coffee seems fit to consume this morning, but I think we give the cooks too much credit. They talk smugly about qualifying for a CIB because they came under mortar attack last night. We just snicker at their vaulted dreams of magnificence. The closest they come to anything exploding is cooking with their field kitchens.

Sloshing through five inches water, the company walks through our single strand of concertina wire to conduct our Search and Destroy mission. After trudging through a mile of soggy rice paddies, we surround a village, and the three of us take up positions along the perimeter. I feel we will be here for a few hours, so I take off my boots and socks to dry. Boutoff eventually lies down and goes to sleep. I sit wavering, trying to keep at least one eye open but find it difficult to do so. "Hey, Caldwell, wake me up in half an hour, will ya?" Caldwell never says much, but I feel he must have enough

common sense to stay alert for half an hour. The sun is not hot yet, and the weather is pleasant in the shade of the bamboo hedgerow. I lie down with my head on my steel pot and drift off to sleep almost immediately. When I awake an hour later, Caldwell lies sleeping soundly, as is Boutoff. I am livid with Caldwell for leaving all three of us sacked out in the middle of our Search and Destroy mission. The goddamn VC could have killed us all, or worse yet, the Captain could have found us sacked out on duty. I wake his black ass up and swear at him for going to sleep without waking either of us up. “Hey, Caldwell, what the fuck is wrong with you, not wakening one of us before you sacked out? You goddamn idiot.”

“Fuck you, Lupton,” Caldwell spits back at me defiantly.

Sergeant Walker begins shouting at us to get our asses in gear. The company is on the move again; I have to hurry to put on my socks and boots. They are nice, dry, and toasty as I put them on because the sun moved while I was asleep. My right ankle feels hot where the sun cooked it for the past hour or so. My first step immerses my foot in tepid rice paddy water. I have to hurry to catch up to the formation. We splash through water to the next village where we place the machine gun at an ox cart trail leading into the ville while teams of people methodically go hootch to hootch searching for the Viet Cong. This time there is no falling asleep. We detain several civilians and after a brief exchange of, “Let me see your can-kuk.”

“Com bic, com bic,” is always their reply to everything.

“What are we going to do with these dickheads?”

“Heck, I don’t know.”

“Okay, you can go now.” We allow the civilians to leave the village, but tell them they cannot get back inside. I do not have a clue if they understand us or not.



Figure 4 - A Company detains villagers during operations near the Cambodian border - 1966.

Suddenly, a hi-tailing gook breaks through our perimeter between Walker’s position and ours. Charlie makes a valiant dash across the flooded rice paddies heading for the sanctuary of the next village. I am still fumbling with my weapon as guys on our left begin shooting furiously at the fleeing gook, but almost immediately, somebody from the center of the village starts yelling, “Cease fire!”

“I got him! I know I got him. I saw a tracer bullet go right into his leg,” Sergeant Walker yells ecstatically, pointing. “Did you see him go down? He got up and kept limping into that village over there.” Walker swears up and down he shot the fleeing enemy, but Captain Mayone refuses to let anybody take out a patrol and search for the wounded VC.

The infantryman's axiom believes that only Viet Cong run away from a formation of heavily armed Americans because why would a loyal South Vietnamese ally have reason to flee us. The logic appears a tad bit murky to me though. However, this particular individual must certainly be our enemy because he is running has ass off.

After extensive searches of several villages, it is apparent to us that each village hosts two Viet Cong. Most of the time, we find them hiding in bunkers dug along side of the houses. We flush out two of these interlopers from one of these holes by throwing in a smoke grenade, and the ARVN policeman accompanying us identifies them as Viet Cong from a list of names he carries. We secure the suspect's arms by placing a bamboo stick through the crook of their elbows and tying their hands in front of them. We blindfold them with their black shirts and lead them away to the Captain's retinue for questioning.



Figure 5 Sgt Prine, Rios, and Lieutenant Rooney secure prisoners - 1966.

When we come back to Cu Chi the next day, my ankle is red and blistered from sunburn. I show it to Sergeant Prine hoping he will not make me go out on ambush tonight. Nope, no such luck with this dickhead, he wants me to put on my sock and boot and do the ambush. I know, and he knows, that when the wool sock breaks the blisters and the rice paddy water saturates my wound that I will probably get a ripping infection, but he has no empathy for me, I have to go. "Fuck this," I declare to myself. I find Rios the medic and show him my ankle.

After I explain my dilemma to him, he says, "No problem, Lupton, wait here," and he disappears into the senior NCO's hootch for about ten minutes then returns to tell me. "You're not going, Lupton. "That ankle's too fucked up to risk it." Ahh, man, the medic saves me! He treats the burn with an ointment, wraps it in a bandage, and I am forever indebted to Rios for getting me out of this ambush.

We have a new face with us this morning. He is Lieutenant Rooney, our new platoon leader. Sergeant Rodriguez does not introduce him to the platoon. No, "how do you do; I am Lieutenant Rooney your new platoon leader." He merely appears at the morning formation, and we slowly walk to the bunker line to toil away at our detail. I have my pant leg rolled up, and I wear a shower shoe so my blisters will dry. This means I will have light duty today. When Lieutenant Rooney questions if I got my sunburn

while on duty, I quickly deny culpability. Oh, no, I could never incriminate myself. Who in their right mind would want to explain to a new officer that all three of us were snoozing away while surrounding a village? This could lead to many difficulties. He accepts my selfish repudiation, and we continue with our dreary assignment, he none the wiser.

Sergeant Rod assigns me to pull guard in front of the work party where I can sit on my ass all morning. This is dick duty, but somebody has to do it, besides, there are never any Vietnamese walking around in front of our sector. If there is, we get to shoot them without getting permission first.

I have been carrying my 400 rounds of machine gun ammunition in two cans tied together with a canvas strap. All of the weight is borne by my right shoulder and after four months of this drudgery, my lower back hurts terribly all the time. I go on sick call because I cannot stand, sit, or lie down without my back nagging me. It keeps me awake at night, and I am tired as hell all of the time.

I go on sick call to battalion and the medic recommends I sleep on a stiff board. He thinks I am shamming when I tell him I am already sleeping on wooden bunks on the bunker line. Routinely, in Hawaii guys would go on sick call and complain that their lower back hurt, and the doctor would have to give them three days of light duty. It was a fraud to get out of training and everybody knows it, but the lifers cannot do anything about the situation. Now my back really does hurt, and the medic just brushes me off. This is not good enough for me, so I walk from the battalion aid station up to the division hospital and get in their line. The division doctor performs a thorough examination, prescribes some muscle relaxers, and gives me a note for three days of light duty. I know Rodriguez is not happy about this but for three days, nobody requires me to fill sandbags or to bust my balls pulling KP. They keep me on bunker guard during the day, and I actively avoid Sergeant Prine who is still pissed at me for enlisting Rios to help me. "SHAZAAM!" my backache goes away. Even I cannot believe it is so easy.

Caldwell and I occupy one of C Company's bunkers this night, and we sit engaged in friendly banter. This camaraderie is unusual for us because we do not like each other very much. He lies inside the doorway of our darkened bunker while I am outside leaning against the sandbags. Boutoff is at the movie back at the battalion area. Suddenly, Caldwell begins thrashing around inside the blackened dugout. "Oo, ah, goddamn motherfu...Ah, shit, Jesus Christ, get out; get out of there!"

I sit stunned, unable to move. He sounds as if the Grim Reaper has him in a strangle hold and is choking him to death. I hear him stomping his foot on the wooden floorboards. "What the fuck is going on, Caldwell?"

He sits panting, and still I wonder what is wrong with him. "A Goddamn fucking rat tried to crawl into ma boot."

"What? Did he like the smell of yo feet?"

"Fuck you, Lupton. The goddamn thing must have been a foot long." In that pitch-black bunker, his demonstrative rat could have felt as big as a large friendly dog.

Just after Boutoff returns from the movie, a huge explosion booms over our heads. I swear the concussion bounces me six inches off the ground. Our ears begin ringing and our hearing diminishes. The 8th Artillery fires from behind Charlie Company and the rounds soar low over our heads as three of the 175s fire in simultaneous volleys.

KA-BOOM, another volley jerks us off the ground one more time. We pray this shit will not go on all night; we will never get any sleep.

After a few more volleys, the cannons cease firing, and the deafening crash of the guns gives way to the crashing thunderstorm passing directly over Cu Chi. Lightning menacingly strikes close by, and such a downpour I have never seen before. After only a few minutes, the water level overflows the bunker's threshold. Almost immediately, the water level increases three feet, as it appears the whole of the Cu Chi compound drains via this one drainage ditch running along the left side of our bunker. A flash flood cascades past us until we sit in the middle of a shallow lake. When precipitation begins dripping through the bunker's ceiling, it becomes impossible to keep dry, and still the rain pours down. We abandon any worry of the Viet Cong sneaking up on the bunker because they would have to swim upstream to get here. In the end, it is all about staying warm while being soaked to the bone.

Maybe, just maybe, I can get us reassigned to another bunker. This one is lower than the one to our right and the one to our left is elevated slightly and probably dryer; both are unoccupied. Call me stupid, but this seems logical. All I need to do is wade through the watercourse draining the entire Cu Chi compound to get to the CP bunker and Sergeant Rodriguez just might give us a new bunker.

I begin walking through the ever-deepening stream. Rubble floats rapidly past me; occasionally I hear rats squeaking distress as they flow past on debris. The water comes up well past my belt buckle as I fight the current; giving one last effort, I begin climbing the sloping far bank.

My logical scheme collapses when I find Sergeant Prine instead of Sergeant Rod; Prine tells me there are no other bunkers. I advise him the bunker on our right is vacant, as is the one on our left, but he does not want to hear it. "Go back to your bunker, Lupton," he instructs me with his normal self-satisfying malice. I will get nowhere with this jerk. While wading back through the rushing, grubby river, I must dodge a pile of rubble floating rapidly past me. I return to our bunker more soaked to the bone than when I left.

All three of us spend the night sitting on a bunk with our feet dangling in water. When it is my time to pull guard, I find both my legs are asleep. I climb to the roof and wrap myself in my poncho to stay warm. It still rains hard while sitting on a wet sandbag vainly trying to keep my eyes open for the next three hours. Knowing that prick Prine is dry and asleep in the CP bunker makes me pray for an opportunity to shoot the bastard as soon as possible.

The next day we begin elevating all of the line bunkers. Originally, we sunk the bunkers down a few feet into the ground to give them low profiles, but now the water table is rising and the bunker floors are never dry, the wood is rotting, and it smells dank inside. The sandbags are made of cotton; the bottom rows rot away quickly causing the front of the bunkers to droop, the gun port lintels sag, and they generally look dilapidated after only a few months.



Figure 6 - A Company's bunker line as seen from the access road leading into the rubber plantation in early 1966.

First, we tear down the sandbags and dig out around the wooden frame. The engineers use a forklift to carefully lift the bunker from the sucking mud then place the frame beside the vacated hole. Into the holes, we throw the old sandbags then re-sandbag the new bunkers using wet dirt from behind the lines. The bags weigh a ton; we gripe and complain incessantly as we mechanically hump the sodden bags like the marching mops carrying their pails of water to the Mickey Mouse wizard in *Fantasia*.

There are flies in this dream too, and I must keep swatting at them as they crawl across my chest then run down my ribs where I smack at them, but they are not flies, they are drops of sweat dripping down my body, splat! More watery flies tickle me as they trickle down my flanks. I muse comfortably to my dream, “what a hot day this must be...”

“LUPTON!” I bolt awake under the sweltering canvas. Sergeant Rod catches me napping in the hootch after noon chow. Beads of sweat trickle down my chest and pool in my solar plexus. As I sit up, the lake of perspiration drains down my front and into my underwear elastic. “Lupton, do you want to go on R & R to Manila?”

“Huh? Where is Manila?” I always get Manila mixed up with Malaysia.

“It’s in the Philippines. Do you want to go? There is an allocation for you if you want it, but I gotta know right now.”

“Okay, yeah, sure, I’ll go to Malaysia, when?”

“That’s Manila, tomorrow morning; now get your ass outside.” We go back to hefting the real sandbags; they are onerous, and I long to revisit to my reverie.

The next morning after chow, I shower and prepare my Class-A khaki uniform. I make sure I align my three rows of service ribbons then I proudly center my favorite medal, the CIB above the ribbons. Beltz and I leave for Saigon on the morning convoy.



Figure 7 ARVN compound in front of the Cu Chi main gate - 1966.

We travel through the town of Cu Chi and observe the civilian life we never see way out in the sticks. The soldier next to me attempts to take a picture of a woman standing along side of the road, but she sees him and quickly turns her head away before he can snap the picture. The Vietnamese instinctively dislike anyone taking their picture.

We arrive in downtown Saigon at the Peninsular Hotel where we check into a room. It is a military hotel with a restaurant and a bar on the roof, so we do not have to venture outside. As infantrymen, we harbor a certain amount of xenophobia towards the Vietnamese. We fear winding up beside the road with our dicks in our mouths, so we ensconce ourselves on the rooftop restaurant of the hotel for the afternoon.

Late in the day, my nose catches a whiff of CS tear gas wafting up from the streets. I go over to the edge of the deck and look down to see the MP holding the wrought iron gate closed with his M14 stuck through the bars prepared to shoot. Two Vietnamese White Mice policemen courageously cower behind him with their pistols drawn. Groups of saffron-clad Buddhist monks banging drums and blowing a kazoo-sounding trumpet run past the hotel with a bunch of civilians, mostly kids, trailing after them. No monk immolates himself on the street corner, and we do not have a clue as to what is going on, so all of this hoopla leaves us to marvel about what has just happened.

The next morning we dress in our khakis and process the required paperwork at the hotel. We load on a bus with wire mesh covering the windows and drive out to Tan Son Nhut airport where we board an Air Force four-engine C-130 cargo plane with the seats facing aft. The plane ride to Manila is six or seven hours long and there is an Air Force sergeant as our steward. He is a lighthearted lifer, and he serves us a box lunch of fried chicken legs with fruit for desert. We cannot talk very much because the engines are so loud, even though this civilian version of the C-130 is much quieter than the stripped down military model. The whole ride is not too bad except sitting backwards feels strange and the plane rocks and rolls a lot.

After landing, a bus without wire mesh windows takes us to an R & R reception room at the Manila Hotel where we fill out our locator cards. The friendly young man conducting the orientation in civilian clothes suggests we put our spare cash in the hotel safe and only take out enough to spend for that day. In addition, he tells us we have to pay for our five-day room charge in advance. Then some locals get their chance go sell us tours. I decline the tours then discover Beltz and I selected the same El Presidente Hotel.

On the courtesy bus to the El Presidente, we decide to get a room together, and we end up on the 8th floor with a nice view of the city.

After dinner, the door attendant intercepts us in the lobby and offers to procure some girls for us. "Hey, why not," says Beltz with a shrug of his shoulders. I only have limited experience with this sort of acquisition, so I go along with the offer. The door attendant and two girls arrive at our room shortly afterwards. We make small talk until it gets dark. The girls will not hear of anything like an orgy, so Beltz and his girl get under the covers of his bed. I crawl under the covers with my girl, and we bang away until I lose my breath when dropping my load.

My girl feigns sleep even though it is still early. After a while, hornyness motivates me to press her for some more of the strange stuff. "I gotta have some pussy, sweetheart, come on babe lie back down." She fends off my advances until I realize I am not getting any more pussy tonight. Now she wants to leave, and at that point, I invite her to, "hit the road." She dresses and leaves without even badgering me for a tip. I am left sitting naked on the bed looking Belt's whore stuff her pillow between her legs and fall back to sleep. This is hardly my idea of debauch but there is nothing more to do than lie down and fall asleep myself.

The next morning, after Belt's whore leaves, Beltz wants to get separate rooms. I tell him to go ahead then go eat breakfast at the Manila Hotel. This is where General McArthur lived when he was commander of American forces just prior to World War II. Of course, it is first class and the food is tropical, fresh, and delicious. During breakfast, I read the *Manila Times* and discover there are horse races today. I have never been to one, so I telephone Beltz to ask him if he wants to go to the races. No, his whore is coming over in the early afternoon, and he is not interested.

I take a taxi back to the El Presidente. I am finishing the *Manila Times* in my room when I get a telephone call from the desk. It seems the manager is not happy about my hooker walking out of the hotel by herself last night. He is concerned about his reputation, but I really do not understand what his problem is. If he does not want hookers running around his hotel then he should not cater to the R&R crowd. Better yet, he should tell his doorman to stop pimping such poor quality girls in his stupid hotel in the first place.

I ponder whether I should get another hotel but dismiss the idea because I have already paid for my week in advance.

I go down to the lobby and ask for my money envelope. Everybody is all smiles with "yes sir, no problem sir, and okay sir," I take out some money. "Now watch me reseal the envelope with melted candle wax, sir." The staff seems happy as a clam. I really do not know why the manager is upset.

There are four airmen at the front desk while I am there. One of them tells me they will stay at the hotel for four weeks TDY. I just gawk at them with envy as they

mill around in their clean, starched Class-As waiting for a bus to take them to the Air Force base. Sardonicly, I calculate they live in a Manila hotel for four weeks, and I have to go back to Cu Chi in four days. I feel sour in the pit of my stomach.

When I return to my room, I get another phone call. The operator tells me I have a visitor. His name is Ben, supposedly, according to Ben, a friend of mine. I tell him the only Ben I know is an Uncle Ben in the rice business back in the United States. Failing to grasp the humor in this subtlety, he insists I must let this man come up to see me. With some misgivings, I acquiesce, and almost instantly, a middle-aged Filipino man raps lightly on my door. This is Ben, all smiles and very friendly, and he claims to have a girl just for me. I see her hanging out at the end of the corridor looking somewhat pretty and smiley, and ah, what the heck. She is there; the price is only 20 pesos, and I am such an Ugly American I cannot say no. "Okay, I'll take her," and the deal is done. There are smiles all around. Ben leaves and we are alone. Guess what I want to do.

She wants to go to the stupid bar. I insist on getting lucky. After a tear forms in her eye, and with much disinclination, I acquiesce to take a taxi to the Silver Dollar Bar. The fleet must be in town because upon opening the door of this dumpy-ass bar, I gaze upon an ocean of white uniforms. The place is loaded with Australian sailors, just cram packed full of them – they are all dressed in clean, starched whites! The band is blaring, the place smells filthy, and with oodles of lament, I sit at a small circular table and order a San Miguel beer.

My whore disappears for the longest time leaving me sitting alone watching a couple of inebriated sailors across the room engage in a fistfight. Sweetheart returns to the table looking as if her pimp just told her she is stuck with me for the night, like it or lump it, and proceeds to down shot after shot of no so cheap whiskey, all of which I have to pay for. I get the feeling she already hates my guts, but I have paid money for her and she is a duty-bound slut. No longer able to endure these insufferable sailors, I open the mens' room door where I find a homely looking hooker pissing down a hole in center of the floor. She gives me the evil eye while hiking up her knickers and stomps out of the room in a huff. I look around me to see no sinks, no toilets, and no urinals, nothing except this hole in the ground confirming my presence in the shithouse. I too piss into the drain hole and flush it down with the rest of my beer, then leave.

I show the whore I am finished my drink, and yell at her over the noise of the band that I want to go back to the hotel. She begins and pissing and moaning, but I do not give a shit. Finally, she staggers into a cab to haggle with the driver about the fare. He insists on too many pesos and both of them grow angry when doll-face gets out of the cab and slams the door.

She loses her balance trying to hail the next cab and damn near gets her ass run over. This driver is more reasonable though and off we go. I want to take her for a romantic walk on the beach to sober her up, but she will have nothing to do with the beach.

I am able to keep her upright as I escort her across the lobby to the elevators. Finally, back inside the room, she disappears into the bathroom where I can hear her throwing up. Somehow, she manages to lock the door upon her exit. I take her clothes off so we can fuck. As we grind away, she yells in my ear "oh baby, oh baby, make me cum, oh baby." I am sure nobody fucks like this. The passion dies abruptly when she passes out cold with me humping away, still haunted by her specter, "oh baby, oh baby."

It is now I discover she locked the bathroom door, and I have to take a crap like a Russian bulldog. I still have diarrhea from Vietnam, so it is not a matter of waiting until I can get the maintenance man to unlock it. With all of the resourcefulness that an old lifer-sergeant would be proud of, I take the P38 on my dog tag chain and manage to unscrew the bolts in the doorknob. I am in. Just in time to unload my mess. At least this toilet flushes and the stink goes down with it. I wash up and survey my sleeping princess then I get into the other bed and go to sleep. I think what a disaster this night has been.

The next morning she is contrite and coquettish, not too hung-over because she regurgitated all of the alcohol I paid for the night before. I order breakfast and she flirts as we eat. I plan to take her back to the bar and trade her in for another girl, but when we leave the hotel, there is Friendly Ben once more. He offers me a car. "How much," I want to know.

"Seventy pesos," he smiles with affable pride and offers to drive us around for the entire day. I hesitate for a moment then say, "ah, what the hell." What do I know? We get into the car and Ben chauffeurs us to Mount Pinatubo for lunch. He fondly remembers the Americans from World War II; I am sure we have a real partisan driving us around today. My impish little mistress discovers that if she puts her forearm next to my dick it will get hard. Playfully, she stimulates my little man until we pull up to the resort. Now I have a ripping hard-on, one I cannot hide. She jumps out teasing me to follow, knowing my situation; she aggressively taunts me out of the car. Sweetheart just laughs her ass off thinking she is funny. Making a declaration in Tagalog to the hotel staff, they giggle and glance amongst each other, and then at me as I try valiantly to hide my half-a-hard-on when getting out of the car. The weather is rainy and foggy but the restaurant is good, the staff dotes over us as if we were VIPs rather than some Private-and-his-Hooker, besides they serve a nice lunch. This is probably the paramount event of the whole trip.

We return to the Silver Dollar Bar this afternoon and the Australian sailors are not quite as spiffy as the night before. They look like they slept in the gutter; their whites are all wrinkly and stained black as if they slept in the gutter. I see swollen lips and blackened eyes. They are still acting goofy, and I just laugh at their antics. I drink more San Miguel and pass the time chatting with a merchant mariner. When we return to the hotel, I make the mistake of letting the whore order from room service what ever she wants for dinner. The waiter spreads out a huge dinner before us for an ungodly amount of pesos, but the chicken fried rice is very good. I stash some of it in the dresser drawer then we fuck our brains out but without the, "oh baby, oh baby," uproar in my ear.

Two days later, I am running low on dough, so I stop by the American Embassy and ask if I can get a cash advance there. They refer me to the R & R hotel, and when I get there, I sit down in front of the same affable fellow who gave us the orientation. When he hangs up the telephone, he is not so congenial anymore and blandly asks me what I want. I tell him I need an advance in pay. "What for," he wants to know.

"Bar bills," I reply tersely. He tells me I cannot get advance pay for bar bills and recommends I hit up my friend for a loan. Beltz, who never leaves his room for the whole five days, loans me twenty dollars, so now I have enough for food and beer for my last two nights.

Everything would be memorable except on my last night in Manila, the hooker does not want to fuck. I keep making advances, and she keeps rejecting me then she

begins picking the calluses from the bottom of her big toe until it turns me nauseous. Finally, I tell her to leave, but she protests there are police, and she will not budge. I really want to toss her out just to get rid of her, but I will get into a shit storm with the manager or the cops. I endure her company from the next bed. In the morning, while walking to the checkout counter, she stalks out of the hotel by herself. Good riddance I think. I deserve a nice erotic encounter, but in the end, she manages to screw it all up.

We fly back to Saigon in the same C-130 with the seats in reverse. Our Air Force sergeant is not as funny on the return trip, and I am glad when we land. When we get off the plane, there is nobody to tell us how to get down to the Peninsular Hotel where we have our fatigues stashed. Beltz and I wonder around trying to find the main gate until we finally find an Air Force enlisted man and get directions from him. He tells us where the gate is and cautions us not to accept Vietnamese offers of a cab. "Be careful, a couple of guys were shot right outside of the gate two days ago. Just grab the first taxi you see and get him to take you to the hotel. They will want a lot of piasters but don't give them what they want. Just hand them one dollar of MPC and walk away; do not let an MP see you give it to them because they will hassle you about dealing in the black market." This is not very reassuring, but we do not have much choice. We eventually locate the main gate and see a large group of Vietnamese milling around just outside the wire. We walk past the MPs as if we know what we are doing, and the gooks swarm us with requests to enrich them.

"Friend, friend, you PX me. Ration card, here friend, friend, buy T-WEE me, friend!" We get many offers from cab drivers, but Beltz engages a witless old Vietnamese man wearing a conical hat standing innocently next to his pedicab. We sit in the front seat as he slowly peddles us through the streets of Saigon. We do not have a clue where we are going, and I feel naked without our weapons. We observe huge piles of garbage in the middle of the intersections, traffic goes in every direction, red lights do not mean much of anything over here, congestion is unparalleled, but everybody keeps moving all the time. I feel like a corpuscle flowing through a blood stream.

Our driver deftly misses the back wheel of a bicycle by an inch, a bus roars past us spewing black diesel smoke in our faces, but he peddles us through the maze of streets until we arrive at the Peninsular. He wants 300 piasters, but we do not have enough change, so we hand him a dollar and a half of MPC and just walk away from him. He babbles protests in gook as we leave, but what can he do.

The next morning Beltz bumps into a friend of his at the hotel, and we go drink coffee. Turning the corner to the restaurant, we bump into Lieutenant Yee who is now with MACV. I wondered what happened to him. He tells us he is an advisor for an ARVN infantry unit. We pull patrols around Saigon every night, and the ARVNs operate much differently than the Wolfhounds. "They shoot up a mortar flare," he says with a chuckle, "and if it lands on some poor old peasant farmer's thatched roof, it burns the goddamn house down. Then the ARVNs get on line to sweep the village; all of them have flashlights," he becomes hysterical explaining their strategy. None of us can believe this is for real. "I'm not supposed to carry a weapon in the city but look at my 357 here." He pulls up his fatigue jacket and shows us this humongous pistol stuck in his pants. By now, we are in fits of laughter.

After a few more war stories, Lieutenant Yee goes his way and Beltz's friend takes us to a bar. We walk along a city street of boarded up buildings where I cannot

even discern where there are active businesses. Beltz's friend pushes on an innocuous 4x8 piece of green plywood giving entrance to a smoky bar crammed full of GIs, yet it is only mid morning. Attractive young Vietnamese girls hustle the GIs for Saigon Tea, which is tea for the price of whiskey. They fidget on the soldiers' laps and let the guys feel them up. We sit in a booth made of black vinyl where we order drinks, and shortly a couple of old MACV lifer-sergeants join us because we have the only two vacant seats in the place. They complain bitterly about their air-conditioner breaking down; all they have are floor fans to stay cool. I take a sly look at the other two and whisper, "Christ! They have air-conditioning! We do not even have a fan." The two lifers sound like winners of a whining contest.

"The VC tossed a hand grenade in here several months ago. It killed three and wounded a whole bunch more," Beltz's friend tells us nonchalantly. It is very crowded in here and after hearing that, I am beginning to feel ill at ease and suggest we leave.

Beltz and I catch a wired-window bus to Than Son Knut; the driver drops us off at a heliport where he claims we can catch a courier chopper to Cu Chi. I am attempting to get us on a manifest when this eccentric old major offers to fly us there in his Huey. "Come on, boys" he says walking out the door; we follow him outside to his helicopter. There is no crew chief or gunner with him or even a co-pilot for that matter. After cranking up the engine to full RPMs, he turns around, and over the whine of the engine and slap of the rotor blades, he yells, "Where is Cu Chi?"

"Northwest," we shout back. He nods okay and off we go. We fly for a while until we see a large American base. After he lands I have to lean up close to his ear and shout, "This is not Cu Chi." He talks on the radio then takes off again in a new direction. We fly for a couple of minutes before we see the mammoth Cu Chi compound looming into the Plexiglas windscreen.

We are home again. Everything is familiar. Envious platoon members come up to me and want to know how my R & R went. I tell them okay, not bad, in fact, my dick hurts when I piss, laughter at every statement.

Sergeant Prine has to fuck up my homecoming when he tells me I have ambush tonight. I protest vehemently and begin furiously yanking my field gear out of my footlocker. My steel pot is gone, stolen. Sergeant Gallegos is livid with me when I ask for a new one. He threatens to kick my ass. "It was stolen out of my hootch," I tell the fat slob.

"You should have turned it in before you went on R & R, Lupton." He only gets more pissed when I tell him I tried to but Capps would not hold it in the supply room for me.

Sergeant Rodriguez comes to my rescue and makes someone else go out on the ambush. I feel secure in my bunk and fall asleep to the thumping of the 4-duce mortars firing over our heads from the battalion area. I feel like I have never been gone.