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I shower early with a group of others who have the coveted three-day pass to Vung Tau, the clap factory of Vietnam. We climb up into the company's duce and a half and sit sweating in the hot sun waiting to join the morning convoy to Saigon. The truck delivers us to a staging area. Waiting for the group is a sergeant who corals us and orders us to follow him. I lag behind the gaggle for a little while then duck behind a large stack of crates until they are out of sight. I do not have the faintest idea where I need to go, so I just stick my thumb out and hitch a ride into the center of Saigon. I am looking for the 140<sup>th</sup> H & M Company in Ben Hoa, the location of my brother's outfit since June.

Quite a place Saigon is. I find myself standing on a corner watching a gang of GI's roar past me on motor cycles. Not the dinky 100 cc jobbies the Vietnamese ride, but the big obstreperous heavy-duty Harleys from the States. Cruising the streets amongst a thousand bicycles and pedicabs, are huge 5-ton wreckers, military busses, and jeeps sporting general's pennants, Mercedes Benzes, Jaguars, and Cadillac limousines. I salute a young lieutenant standing on the corner and ask him where Ben Hoa is. He says he is trying to get a ride to take him out there too, and we can split a taxi if only we can get a cab to stop for us.

A little boy with a shoeshine kit solicits us to shine our boots. "You got to watch these little bastards," the Lieutenant warns me, "if you say no, they will splash talcum powder on your boots, and then you will have to pay him to shine them. We both tell the little kid to didi mao, but the kid won't give up so easily. He wants to show us some boom-boom girls, but we just ignore him then a cab stops just in time as the little prick pulls out his can of Johnson & Johnson baby powder.

We settle on a fare and the cab takes us to a checkpoint outside of the city where the ARVN MPs salute the lieutenant. I am a little surprised with the courtesy because we never salute Vietnamese officers. I ask them if they know where the 140<sup>th</sup> H & M Company is. They just shrug their shoulders and point down the road, so we get back into the cab. We drive through the little town of Ben Hoa until we get to the 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Division's main gate where the cab takes off, and the lieutenant disappears into the compound.

The MPs cannot tell me anything about the 140<sup>th</sup> H & M Company, but they do tell me there are plenty of maintenance and supply outfits along the road I just traveled. I have to haggle with a Lambretta driver to back track along Route 1, which is a modern highway with the consummate traffic load of the Interstate 40.

The little three-wheeled Lambretta turns onto the Road of Chance and chugs mightily along the dusty shoulder as a huge convoy of flatbed tractor-trailers loaded with ammunition roar past us spewing black clouds of diesel exhaust into our faces. Eventually, we find the large main gate of the Ben Hoa supply depot. I ask the MPs if he ever heard of the 140<sup>th</sup> H & M Company, and to my surprise, they tell me exactly where it is. I find the orderly room and ask for my brother. They point to a commo van, which is a big box on the back of a truck, where I find him at a sewing machine busily sewing chevrons on the sleeves of his buddies' uniforms.

After excited salutations, he shows me how he is making a few extra bucks sewing chevrons and patches on uniforms. He gets somebody to take our picture.



**Figure 1 Bill and David Lupton, Ben Hoa August 1966.**

We drink some sodas and pass the time until chow. I get to eat a decent meal in his REMF mess hall. I am surprised at how much better the quality of their food is compared ours. There are no bugs in the bread. After chow, we walk to his EM Club where I am awed with its immensity, its cleanliness, and its young tight-assed Vietnamese barmaids, none of which I have ever experienced.

After getting fairly soused, we walk precariously back to his hootch where they have plenty of beer in coolers and ice for the asking. His hootch mates are much friendlier than my hootch mates are. There does not seem to be so much inhospitality here. They are impressed with my CIB. One guy likes the way it looks and wishes he could get one too. I tell him, no, he does not want one. They are so naïve I have to laugh.

My stupid brother drinks a lot of beer and gets into a rowdy debate about something petty. One of his hootch mates asks me if he always argues a lot. I tell him yes, he is the older brother, and normally he gets his way.

At just about lights out, my brother's company commander walks into the hootch to see what all of the commotion is about. When his CO walks in behind him, my big mouth brother is expounding loudly about something inane. He has to grovel when told to quiet down. "Yes sir, no problem sir, we will shut up now sir. Good night sir," says the drunken sot at the same time he climbs into his bunk fully clothed and passes out. The captain paternally turns out the lights. I find it interesting that nobody yells attention when the officer walks in.

The only bunk available to me is one underneath a leak, so we have to drape a poncho on top of the mosquito bar. I tell them this is much better than what is available to me. They are a bit mystified.

The next morning after chow, we go see his First Sergeant to see if brother Lupton can get a day off to go into Ben Hoa and do some Christmas shopping for our relatives. His First Sergeant is nice enough to give him a pass. We catch another Lambretta at the main gate and travel the Road of Chance once again into the little municipality of Ben Hoa. We get out and walk around the town. Our first stop is at a clothing store where a half-breed French/Vietnamese guy, speaking perfect English, sells us imitation cashmere sweaters at a ridiculously high price for our Aunt and Mother. With our packages in hand, we walk around Ben Hoa some more.

During our stroll through the downtown, a Lambretta driver haplessly cruises past us unaware that one of his three passengers is attempting to piss into his fuel tank. The driver jokes with the other two GIs as the airborne troopers point to shops along the opposite side of the street to divert the operator's attention. The gas spout is located right behind the driver, and it is easy for the rogue prankster to stand on his knees and urinate into it. Like an idiot, the pisser grins broadly at us as we stare at this spectacle. A short distance down the road, the Lambretta sputters to a jerky stop, much to the bewilderment of the owner. As the driver tries repeatedly to kick-start the engine, the three inebriated GIs tumble out of the vehicle. They are laughing so hard none of them can stand up. We just chuckle and walk away.

I tell my brother I want to get a haircut, so we find a barbershop. The place is not too busy so both of us are ushered into a chair right away. The barber is very proficient and when he is done, he gives me a shoulder massage. I have heard others talking about barbershops where you can get a hand job for fifty cents, and I am sorely disappointed when my barber does not invite me into the back room. I really do not think this place gives hand jobs, but to satisfy my curiosity, I look behind the curtain to see if there are any young honeys waiting for an assignment. To the barber's curiosity, and my great disappointment, there is none; I shamefacedly pay for my haircut and leave.

Brother Lupton and I catch a pedicab for a slow tour of the downtown area. I feel very spiffy in my new haircut; the air is still cool, and the Vitalis has not yet dried, so I do not put on my hat. I sit confidently with my arms spread on the back of the seat, my right leg crossing my left knee, and feeling good about everything when this dickhead MP yells at me to put my on hat. The chickenshitness of the military know no bounds; it is ubiquitous. I grudgingly comply because I am technically AWOL from Vung Tau.

We cruise for a while then find a bar, pay the cabby, and my good feelings dissipate with the tension inside the establishment. We sit in a booth only to have broken glasses skitter over the floor as three drunken assholes begin smashing bottles and glasses against the wall. The Vietnamese cannot do anything about them, for they are physically too small. After the anus brains break every piece of glass within reach, they stagger out of the bar yelling obscenities at the owners.

We drink our beers amongst the carnage and decide this is not where we want to be, so we pay our tab and leave. My brother knows of a bar that serves pizza and after much walking, we find it. We feel esteemed when two bar girls join us. I break down my xenophobic aversion to gooks and let one cutie sit on my lap until my legs go to sleep. She lets me cop a feel now and again, but she will not let me go much farther. We buy the girls some Saigon Tea just to keep them interested in us and chat amiably for the rest of the afternoon when we must start back to the 140<sup>th</sup> H & M Company.

After tender farewells, I cop one last feel; we walk out of the bar only to have five little Munchkins surround us. Each one wants us to go with him to fuck his sister. The juvenile pimps nearly come to blows when we follow one and not the other. We stick our heads into one whorehouse with eight stereotypical, over-mascaraed ugly-ass hookers idly sitting in beach chairs; one of the pimps pushes me into the whorehouse. The girls do not seem too interested, so we decide to see what the other pimps have to offer.

"GI, you, my friend, come me, get boom-boom." Another overeager pimp implores us to follow him. His companion is adamant we should follow him as an alternative.

“GI, friend, friend, come me, boom-boom, my friend, friend, boom-boom!” These little guys are pesky. I almost agree to dip my wick into one girl who looks nice, but I do not like the set up in this brothel. A mere sheet separates us from all of the other pasty-faced hookers. I feel uncomfortable and decline their frenzied entreaties.

“Friend, you, GI, you come me, get numba one boom-boom girl, my sister, GI, come me,” implores another seven year old as he tenaciously grabs my hand. He stares up at me with teary brown eyes, fated with hunger if he does not come home with the bacon. Pulling hard, he urgently tries to get me to follow him. “Come, me, GI, you boom-boom, you blow-job mother my!” I envision a scraggily old beetle-nutted set of teeth going down on my tender member. That is it; even I have had enough sleaze for one day.

I see a chance to hop aboard a passing Lambretta, and we take it. By running as fast as we can, we jump head long into the still moving three-wheeler and yell to the driver to go! “Go! Go! Go!”

The minions half-heartedly follow us until they realize there will be no commission from sistersan. Through an oily blue exhaust plume, I watch the dispirited little waifs diminish as the taxi gains speed. Now we must brave yet another Lambretta ride over the Road of Chance.

Our ride to the main gate is just as terrifying as my first. I am glad when the taxi drops us off, for within the concertina wire, is where I feel safest. We shower and eat chow, again another good REMF meal. Bedtime comes a bit earlier tonight, and I wake the next morning refreshed and ready for another day of debauch. My brother cannot get another pass to town today, so he occupies himself with his sewing machine. I am bored all day long. I should visit Ben Hoa’s whorehouses, but I am AWOL from Vung Tau and do not feel like risking the MPs, so I just hang around all day long.

After evening chow I suggest we walk over to the 93<sup>rd</sup> Evac Hospital, which happens to be next to the 140<sup>th</sup> H & M Company to see if there is anybody from A Company still recouping from wounds from the 19<sup>th</sup>. When I ask a nurse if anybody is from A Company, she points us to none other than Caldwell. I wondered where he disappeared.

“Hey, Caldwell, how did you get here?” I ask him. He is surprised to see anybody from the platoon.

“I don’t know, I just got sicker than shit. I figure one day I will just roll over and die.” He lies lethargically with his eyes half open. I do not feel sorry for him though, he is just one more pain in the ass Brother I will not have to deal with when I get back.

“What do you got?”

“I said I don’t know. The docs don’t know either. It is not malaria; I just don’t know anything. They say I’m going to be evacuated to Japan.”

“Man, you are one lucky son of a bitch, Caldwell. I wish somebody would evacuate me to Japan. You know, Ward was evacuated to Japan, and we haven’t heard anything from him for the past six months, except he is spending more than he is being paid.”

The nurse interrupts us and tells us we have to leave now, for it is almost lights out. “You take care of yourself, Caldwell.” I tell him.

“Yeah, Lupton, it is nice you stopped by.” We walk back to my brother’s tent and swill beer with his hootch mates until lights out.

The next morning I leave the safety and comfort of Ben Hoa. I hitch hike to the Peninsular Hotel where I am able to get a bus that takes me to the afternoon convoy to Cu Chi, and when I return to the company area, I am disheartened to be back.

During my absence, one of the FNGs accidentally fired off an M79 round through the tent roof, and it exploded harmlessly on the back road. We laugh and joke about this incident because it is not the first time this has happened, and besides, the hole is at the other end of the hootch, so I will not have to deal with leaking rainwater.

While I was gone, a hand grenade rolls off the officer's hootch, falls to the ground, and explodes. The only casualty is Captain Mayone's jeep, the radiator leaks now. First Sergeant Letoto thinks he knows who tossed the grenade, but he cannot prove it. "At the next morning's formation, the culprits wouldn't even look directly at me. I tell them I will court-martial your asses for cowardice if I catch you pulling this shit again." Letoto tells me 40 years hence.

R&R saves me from the 25<sup>th</sup> Division's new Ambush Academy. After 3<sup>rd</sup> squad got wiped, the Division set up a three-day course on how to do ambushes. This is a paradox, for we have been in Vietnam seven months already, and I personally have been on over 80 ambushes. Every unit in the Division must attend these classes, and for their graduate exercise, they go on an ambush. One class pulling their graduation-day ambush actually kills a Viet Cong colonel who runs a barbershop on the base.

Captain Mayone concludes we need to keep busy, so several days later, we load into trucks for a ride to some nameless coordinates on his map. I put my machine gun on top of the cab's canvas roof, and the convoy takes off. We drive through Cu Chi then out west for several miles before we turn onto a smaller road. The trucks travel fast because we do not have helicopter cover, which means the convoy relies on rapid movement for its security.

When we stop, we jump out of the trucks, quickly form a line abreast, and move very rapidly through the village, not stopping until we cross the rice paddies beyond. After everyone catches up, Captain Mayone orders us to keep moving quickly into the woods. We enter a copse where I see a man with a rifle way off into the distance. Tightening up my sphincter as we approach, I can see two men wearing helmets and holding rifles, sitting with their backs to us. They are too far away to distinguish their features clearly, so I click off the safety of the machine gun and raise the muzzle ready to fire. "They're okay," yells Captain Mayone. Upon hearing this, the two ARVNs turn around to see us rapidly approaching, and they stand up smiling and waving, clueless. Both of them hold M1 Garand rifles. Phew wee, man, I almost blew those two ARVNs away. I put the gun on safety again, and we keep on walking as the two ARVNs act as our guides. We hike through another village searching the houses, looking for Viet Cong listed on a piece of paper a National Policeman carries.

In a pigsty lying beside a hootch, I observe a huge-ass sow, which becomes agitated when surrounded by so many strangers. She is a humongous brood sow with a dozen piglets running all over her, some attempting to hide underneath her flabby teats. They squeal like crazy when the old swine struggles to get up as we come near. This swine must be eight feet long and is so big her teats scrape the ground as she slowly lumbers away, grunting and snorting and almost squashing a couple of her offspring. The damn piglets are squealing and scurrying in every direction. We marvel at the size of this hog. I have never seen such a monster swine before.

Two water buffalos in an adjacent pen are becoming rambunctious. There is a general belief that water buffalo will charge a Westerner, and to some extent, this is true. I observe that water buffalos living close to towns and military bases where there are plenty of GIs are very subdued and not too concerned with Westerners. However, the water buffalos living in remote villages can become very agitated when we approach.

Buxton is with me as assistant gunner, and when he accidentally steps into a depression, he winds up pushing the muzzle of his M16 into the mud. The flash suppressor is clogged full of dirt, so Buxton takes the weapon and bounces the muzzle against a rock. After hitting it several times, he looks down the barrel to see how much remains then bangs the butt on the rock several times. He peers down the barrel again, bangs the rifle one more time when I ask him if the safety is on. Both of us just about crap our pants when he finds the safety is set to full automatic. "Very good Buxton, I would have had to pick up all of your stupid brains if that thing went off." We laugh as he puts the rifle on safety and busies himself dislodging the rest of the dirt from the tiny orifice with a twig.

Sergeant Rodriguez snaps at us to pay attention and move forward. With Brooks on my left, we struggle through a massive bamboo hedgerow containing many wait-a-minute vines. The vines are long stringy plants that sport thorns resembling cats' claws. I try to jerk my arm free hoping they will pull off the vine but that does not work at all. I have to step back and unhook each cat claw to get free.

Together, Brooks and I both break out of the hedgerow into an open expanse of rice paddies. Slightly in front of Brooks, and to his left, stands a very large and very agitated bull water buffalo. He is snorting and stomping his hoof on the ground, and if ever there was an animal warning us, "to get out of my rice paddy, you stupid American lackey," this is it. Hoping dearly that he can slink away unnoticed, Brooks toddles obliquely toward me and away from the pissed-off gray bovine when the bull charges. Brooks attempts to flee but on his second step, he stumbles in the soft dirt. Two thousand pounds of sinewy muscle, head down, and horns low are set to gore poor Brooksie to his doom when the rope securing the ring in the bull's nose draws taught with a twang. The line holds true, and the bull's head snaps down between his front legs forcing his hindquarters to rotate awkwardly to preserve his balance, in effect, stopping the brute on a dime. Brooks could have reached out and touched the tip of the bull's horns had he a mind to do so. The bull turns away from Brooks, snorts his displeasure, and trots back to where he was standing. He rotates towards us again and licks the blood running out of his brutalized nose.

Truncated Brooks, the failed bullfighter, struggles to stand under the weight of his field gear and ammunition and trots briskly away from this behemoth, sweating and swearing all the while. Now I am the closest to the beast; I emulate Brooks by running after him in an unselfish act of cowardice. After this incident, we give the noble water buffalo all of the respect they deserve wherever we find him. In addition, I thank God to no end for the high tensile strength of cheap plastic rope.

When we enter the next village, we encounter 10 young men who seem to be waking up from a nap. It is very extraordinary to see Vietnamese lying in bed in the middle of the day unless he or she is sick. We speculate they are Viet Cong resting from their night's mischief. The National Policeman ties them up and flies them out of the

field; we continue with our sweep through the village until we come to a large expanse of rice paddies.

The company ventures out to await pick up by helicopters when we get the word there is a chopper down. Captain Mayone and his group begin running toward the stricken helicopter. Trailing out behind him, the rest of the company tries desperately to keep up.

The Colonel's C & C ship is sitting amongst some scrub trees, the blades twisted and broken. The cigarettes have taken their toll as I come huffing and puffing through the soft gooeey mud. I am walking as fast as I can to reach the crash site, for I am too pooped to run anymore. Most of the company is already securing the area when Sergeant Rodriguez instructs me where to place the machine gun. Most of us lie on the ground panting deeply, recovering, and looking curiously behind us when Captain Mayone shouts at us. "I want all of you men to keep looking forward, away from here," he stomps towards us pulling his RTO by the handset cord and waiving his arm, he bellows, "*you bastards!*" Calling us bastards is a personal affront. There are many ill feelings toward the Captain after the 19<sup>th</sup>. Many of the men feel he should have been on the ground with us. So, we are bastards, eh. That really pisses me off, and I loose respect for him forever. Well, fuck 'im then. I roll over on my stomach and impassively stare into the scrub bushes several feet in front of me. There are not any Viet Cong here anyway.

While we wait for a Shithook to collect the downed helicopter, just as a test, I wonder to myself what Sergeant Rod will say if I try to take a little bit of a nap, so I rest my chin on the machine gun and close my eyes. I find out shortly enough when he spies me sleeping. I get a real good ass chewing, and my curiosity is well satiated.

To keep Rod off my ass, I take my shaving brush out of the rubber band on my helmet and begin oiling my ammo and wiping the splashed mud from my machine gun. Boutoff may be a horse's ass, but he teaches me to keep the machine gun sparkling clean all the time. He is always touching it up with his oiled shaving brush, so I do the same.

After the Colonel, his broken helicopter, and his retinue have flown away, the company forms up in the open field for extraction. The removal is uneventful; we fly back to Cu Chi where our lone company truck takes us back to the company area standing up.

After chow, the mortars register their guns. I notice they fired a couple of flare rounds to test the wind. The parachute flares drift back to our location, which creates a competition to retrieve the spent flare. I have to vie fiercely with two others to retrieve my prize by jumping and grabbing the cable holding the spent flare to the parachute. I am triumphant and retreat with my souvenir to the hootch where I detach the still red hot metal parts and mail the nylon chute home to my younger brother.

The company clerk comes running past our hootch. "We've got incoming!" he yells while heading for the mortar platoon's fire-control bunker, which is the only shelter with overhead sandbags. The Viet Cong lob a dozen mortars into the battalion area. The first round lands on the battalion mailroom, sparing our letters from destruction, but killing the mail clerk while he is lying on his bunk. Rounds hit close to the enlisted men's club, scattering the drinkers like a disturbed anthill. They do not know where to run, so many cower in the drainage ditch where the mud is shin deep as the mortars land on the road all around them. After about five minutes, gunships fly over our heads, rumbling greedily to find the Viet Cong. They shoot up Nightmare Village, but I know

there are no live targets for them to see. Before the first mortar round lands, the Viet Cong are retreating into their tunnels. Because of this attack, we busy ourselves with stringing even more barbed wire, cutting trees in front of our lines, and filling eternal numbers of sandbags to stack around our hootches.

While staffing B Company's bunker line, I muse about the number of times I have escaped my destruction, and like everybody else, I am afraid, superstitious, and foreboding about my future. I conjure visions of REMFdom where I can moil in safety. I know! I will ask Lieutenant Holiday if I can get off the line. No bullshitting around with dreams and phony pretexts, I will just lay it out on the line - I am chicken. He will recommend me for the motor pool, some place where I am not scared shitless all the time. I find the Lieutenant and O'Shaughnessy in B Company's headquarters bunker where I present my case to him. He does not waiver by the fact that I am fearful, and his answer is no. I am distraught. I walk back to my bunker just before the rain starts pouring down and resolve myself to my fate. During a lightning flash, I find a small bible in the corner of the bunker; it is a sign of divine providence. I begin carrying it in my left breast pocket hoping that if a sniper shoots me in the chest that the damn bible is covering my heart, stopping the bullet cold. I will have the consummate souvenir with bragging rights about my escape from doom. There might be a God after all; all he has to do is give me a revelation. I never read the stupid bible anyway, but it provides me with solace for the rest of the year.

The hootch fills up with replacements. How portentous it must appear to the pink faced FNGs that they are surrogates for an entire squad killed on ambush. Every man's bunk is a dead man's bunk.

Two ARVNs bunk in our hootch too. Both of the ARVNs speak English well, especially one of them. They pretty much stay to themselves though, and I cannot recollect anybody having an intimate conversation with them except Sergeant Fitch who puts on half a load and saunters into the hootch to talk to the ARVNs, but he will only speak to them in broken English. "Doggone Sarge," exclaims one of the replacements, "he speaks perfect English. You don't have to talk to him like a child."

"I know that!" Fitch replies, irritated that some stupid assed FNG would interrupt his bull session, "I juss want him to understand me, thass all brother, thass all."

"Well, you can talk to him normally, Sarge," lectures the exasperated FNG who is now beginning to appreciate the command of three-point-two stupid juice.

"You com bic? We drink beaucoup beer. We no care nut-ting. Tomorrow, go fie-ting V C," Fitch uses his hands to pantomime a rifle. He wavers unsure of his balance, "maybe all die! Hahahahaha!" He falls back onto the opposite bunk, looks around through blood shot eyes, chuckles, and smiles like a Cheshire cat, only stupider. The interpreter replies speaking perfect English. Fitch will not give up; he continues to act dumb as he endeavors to explain why A Company has so many new replacements. I am positive the ARVN appreciates Fitch is an idiot.

Tiring of this international relations disaster, the gaggle of replacements drifts away and re-congregates at our end of the hootch. A loud bang causes us old timers to fall on our knees. The FNGs look at us, flabbergasted at our spontaneity. "What was that?" Boutoff grouses. A replacement sheepishly admits he wanted to see what would happen when he lit a firecracker. "Don't *ever* do that again, man," lectures Boutoff sternly. I can see vile embitterment in his eyes. "That's not a good idea here."



“Okay, okay, I won’t do it again.” We all sit back on our bunks and exchange glances. Now we have another idiot at this end of the room.

“I like to shit myself,” I am laughing uncontrollably, it strikes me funny the way the old-timers race for the ground while the cherries just look at us dumbfounded. We are passing more beer around when I see Captain Mayone open the door.

“A-TEN-SHUN!” I yell at the top of my lungs, everybody snaps to, beers still in hand.

“Stand at ease. What was that shot?” Mayone demands to know.

“It’s just one the FNGs, sir. He set off a firecracker,” I point to the guilty nitwit who now believes the captain will take him outside and shoot him.

“Don’t do that again,” Mayone orders dryly while looking directly at the startled FNG.

“Yas, sir, yas, sir, I wont,” he knows he has fucked up big time. Mayone nods. He glares with a fear-provoking eye at every one in the room; making sure each new man understands the gravity of their actions; without saying a word, he turns and leaves. Immediately, we revisit our beer cans.

When the FNGs arrive, the platoon reorganizes by moving Moschkin from first squad into the newly reconstituted third squad. Harnack receives promotion to buck sergeant, and he and Hamby become team leaders in first squad. Sergeant Wight, who was on R & R on the 19<sup>th</sup>, remains as a team leader in third squad. Sergeant Motta, a replacement staff sergeant, is the new third squad leader. He occupies my former bunk in the apposing corner of our hootch, the coolest spot in the hootch.

I come into the darkened hootch after returning from the EM club with a belly full of beer. The rafters dance their half circle jig, and shortly, I feel I need to barf. I stand up, wobble, and then collapse onto my knees. I cannot find the hootch door. I founder around at the foot of the bed trying desperately to figure out which direction lays the door when I must give it up and regurgitate my night’s libation in the middle of the isle. Damn! Now I have to clean it up. I crawl over to my bunk and retrieve my towel. I wipe up the mess and throw the towel onto the sandbag wall as I totter out to the third rubber tree to take a leak. After pissing, I lurch to second tree where I must hold on with both hands, and then I grope my way to tree one. With a last desperate effort, I fall upon the sand bag wall; I blanch at the stench of my towel, and then I open the screen door and fall into the hootch. By crawling on the floor, I am able to find my bunk and flop into my rack.

At the next morning’s formation, Sergeant Motta complains to Sergeant Rodriguez. “This man threw up in the hootch last night.” He points to me. I look curiously at him wondering why he needs to tell Sergeant Rod anything.

“Did he clean it up?”

“Yes.”

“Well, what is the problem then?” asks Rod. Motta has no answer. He must be pissed off for smelling the puke wafting out of my towel all night. I stand there smirking. Ya know; I like Sergeant Rodriguez after all. He is my kind of platoon sergeant.

Second platoon receives the honor of undergoing helicopter training. While the rest of the company sweats their asses off on bunker building detail, we attend classes run by officers from the 25<sup>th</sup> Aviation while cooling it under the shade of the rubber trees. A nattily dressed major explains to us what we will be doing for the next few weeks. A

C&C slick will fly low and slow in a designated area, zigzagging in attempts to draw fire from the Viet Cong. When they come under fire, our platoon will scramble and fly to the location where we will sweep through the area then immediately fly out while the lone recon slick will continue baiting the VC.

Division also devises a method for finding VC tax collectors. “We get reports from birddog pilots that fly over the same area day after day, and they can tell when VC tax collectors are working a road because they set up roadblocks to shake down the civilian population. What we are going to do is fly you guys into this roadblock using what we call contour flying. We fly about 30 feet off the ground, jumping treetops, and rice paddy dykes, and coming up on them so fast that they cannot di di mao the area.” He looks at us and we stare back. I wonder who is going to be our reserve force, the rest of A Company, another company, who? The Major does not address this aspect of his plan, and because of the 19<sup>th</sup>, most of us are apprehensive about this harebrained concept. “Don’t worry; we will have four gunships flying a daisy chain around you all of the time you are on the ground.” This settles our concerns somewhat. “Do you men have any questions?” Everyone sits blankly staring back at him. I think he is upset that nobody shows much interest in his project.

We rehearse climbing in and out of an imaginary helicopter. Each squad of six or seven men has a particular seat they must occupy on the aircraft. We are to exit the chopper quickly, run to our designated position in the line, and then begin our search immediately, no screwing around. After two days of rehearsing, we are ready for a practice run.

The platoon climbs into the company’s truck, and we drive to the heliport where we sit in our groups and wait for something to happen. Eventually, something does happen. The engines crank up with a slow whine and away we fly. The choppers rise several hundred feet and fly west. I sit in the middle of the helicopter where I can see between the pilot’s seats. After flying for a while, I can figure out where the altimeter, the fuel gage, and the compass are situated. I see a new device this time. A map is automatically orientating itself as we fly by scrolling a chart between two rollers. I find it interesting to watch until the choppers descend to 50 feet elevation, and I find myself shaking. I must push my knees together against the machine gun and hold my elbows tight against my sides so the FNGs on either side of me will not feel me quivering.

At 90 knots, the ground blurs as it screams past the skids. I look out of the front window only to see a hedgerow of bamboo rushing toward us. Oh, oh, oh Jesus Christ we are going to collide when at the last moment the helicopters blip up 10 feet to roar over the bamboo. Phew, shit, we sink down to the deck once again only to hop a large rice paddy dyke then the formation snakes over the next hedge row and hurriedly approaches the LZ. The noise rises to a crescendo as the slick bucks nose-up; I feel the stinger scrape the ground as the ship breaks hard. Everybody lets out a groan as the helicopter comes to an express halt. The chopper levels out just as the skids gently touch the ground. We jump out, rush into our formation, and kneel in the soft gushy mud until the slicks depart.

Lieutenant Holiday and Sergeant Rod quickly lead us into the hedgerow surrounding our target village. When we pause, I spy a black-pajama clad gook disappearing into the rows of a cornfield three hundred yards to our left rear. I yell and

point to him, but nobody takes any notice of me. I think the gunships will take the guy on, but they do not and the gook gets away.

We move through the village quickly without incident, all the while, there are four gunships circling low overhead. On the other side of the ville, we quickly jump into the returning slicks, and they fly us at high altitude back to Cu Chi.

The following day we load the ships and fly south, past Saigon and Bear Cat, to some remote outpost not in our AO where we sit around on the bare ground for several hours before Sergeant Rod orders us into a formation with all of our gear and ammo. We stand at attention in a long rank as a group of field grade officers inspects us. I stand nervously as a major passes me but then he stops in front of Hamby. "What do you think of this Sergeant?"

"Awe, it's okay, sir." Hamby is never much for words, and he is as nervous in front of unfamiliar brass as am I. If the major had asked me, I would have told him. "I'm scared shitless, sir, and by the way, where are our reinforcements incase you put us into the shit again." Sergeant Rod would not appreciate my candor, and the officers pass slowly down the line looking each man up and down with blank expression.

Sergeant Rodriguez dismisses our formation as the aviation officers climb into their C & C ship and crank up their helicopter. Churning up a huge cloud of dust in their wake, they fly off to pull their recon mission.

We strike up conversations with a couple of the warrant officer pilots while we kill time waiting for something to happen. They appear a little older than we are, and they are more urbane too. Their fatigues are fresh and not faded, their boots are shiny, their brass is polished, and we are besotted when discovering they have hootch-maids to wash their laundry, clean their hootches, and make their beds. Officers are on a first name basis within their clique, which is far cry from the incivility directed toward ourselves. When I look at the difference in the comportment of the two groups of soldiers, it is apparent the infantry is much more rudimentary than our peers in the aviation are.

The C & C ship returns after a few hours without experiencing fire. They load us into the choppers again for the flight back to Cu Chi. While blissfully enjoying the cool breeze at 2,000 feet, the helicopter in front of us suddenly peels away, dives sharply, and disappears from view. We are stunned. We have just lost a whole slick full of infantrymen! Over the roar of the rushing air, a crewmember yells they just went back for fuel. The respite among the cargo bay is palpable as we settle back against the nylon seats with relief.

The next day the battalion flies out to the field next to the Cambodian border, not too far from where 3<sup>rd</sup> squad got wiped. After the first day of digging foxholes and sandbagging our positions, we begin working with the helicopters. The C & C ship works in conjunction with the other ground units that perform sweeps around our bivouac. The recon pilot busies himself by searching for VC suspects attempting to escape the advancing ground troops. They disguise themselves as farmers by pretending to hoe the ground or herd water buffalos in circles, and they generally attempt to blend into the civilian population.

We occupy our slick using a four-man squad. Our pilot flies above and behind the recon Huey as he performs his searches until he finds a suspect he wants then he calls for our ship to land and scarf up the VC suspect. Our slick drops down next to the

dumbfounded gook as the gunships circle low overhead. Charley has no place to hide so he meekly gives up. One of us grabs him by the arm and hustles his ass into the helicopter. After a few snatches, we have three or four suspects trussed up and blindfolded, so we drop them off with the S2 and continue our operations.

Working like this is much more fun than humping the rice paddies all day long. Most of the time we lie around sleeping and only four men need go out at a time. Everybody gets to take a turn too, and I fly for half the day and participate in capturing a few suspects. The ground troops engage the Viet Cong several times in small fierce firefights, but our platoon makes no hostile contact at all. I participate in two ambushes right along to the bank of the Mekong River, but we make no contact. After four days of this easy operation, the battalion declares success and flies back to Cu Chi.

After returning to the hootches the next day, Sergeant Prine tells me I am to give the machine gun to Smith, a replacement levied from Germany, who joins the company while we are in the field.

“What do you mean?”

“Just what I said, Lupton, Smith is going to carry the gun from now on.” I hate Prine. I know he is trying to fuck me over.

“No,” I insist, “I took the gun over from Knott. It’s mine now.”

“Do what I tell you, Lupton.” He angrily stalks away leaving me standing there fuming. I see Lieutenant Holiday walking between the hootches toward me.

“Hey Lieutenant, Prine just told me I have to give the machine gun to some FNG. I took the gun over...”

“This is the Army, Lupton, and that is the decision that has been made,” and he too walks away just that quickly. I can just go fuck myself for all he cares. I vow I will never cover his ass again while he runs for the helicopter. Bitching to Sergeant Rodriguez will not make any difference, so I give up the gun to Smith. I turn in my 45 pistol to Capps; he issues me a brand new M16. After running out of ammo on the 19<sup>th</sup>, I want as many bullets as I can carry and this advanced bullet launcher will do just fine.

Caldwell and I bicker about who is the assistant gunner. I have been lugging ammo since we got off the stupid ship seven months ago, longer than he has. I deserve to carry that gun. Not only did I take it over when Knott buys the farm, I have been carrying the stupid thing, and doing well, for the past four weeks. Besides, the gunner is an E4 position, and I have heard that I am up for promotion to Spec 4, so promote me. The promotion is a phantasm though, and it is nothing but rumor.

The gun crew assembles with the new third squad outside the hootches. Smith, who bunks with the second squad, is late to join us with *my* machine gun. He looks a lot like a basic trainee dressed in brand new jungle fatigues and ill-fitting web gear. He carries the gun with the sling looped around the back of his neck; it will not be long before his neck will be sore and chaffed. He carries no ammunition. “Oh, should I take a hundred-round belt with me?” He asks me.

“This is Vietnam, ya know,” I answer contemptuously. I could be civil, but I look at this idiot as an interloper, and already I do not like him. Still holding the machine gun around his neck, he tries to dash inside his hootch to retrieve his ammo belt. The gun stops him dead when he attempts to run through the door. Everybody laughs at his misfortune. Red faced and rueful, he rejoins the squad and tries to load the gun. “Don’t load it yet Smith. Don’t worry, I’ll tell you when.” I lecture him without empathy.

We stop just behind the bunker line waiting for the twilight to fade. “Look here Smith. Put the front part of the strap on the left side of the gun barrel and the other end goes on the right side of the butt. That way when you put the gun down, especially when they are shooting at your dumb ass, the strap will not fall into your ammo belt and become jammed in the feed tray. Like this,” I show him, “now you can carry the gun on your right shoulder for a long time without getting tired.” In Germany, he rode around in an APC and did not have to lug the machine gun for long periods as we do here. “Ya got the safety on?”

“No.”

“Well put the goddamn safety on. The object is to kill them not us.” He chafes at my advice.

Sergeant Motta leads the new third squad on their first ambush in front of the company area. The patrol winds its way through the zigzag in the barbed wire. It is an easy LP. Nobody smokes anymore, nobody goes to sleep on guard anymore, and everybody pays attention.

At dawn, we gather up the ambush, and in single file, we walk back toward our concertina wire. Positioned in the middle of the squad, still half-asleep, I trundle along thinking greatly about my next cigarette when the patrol halts at the edge of the rubber trees. Our new squad leader fires off a hand flare to signal the bunker guards that we are returning. Nobody has ever done this before. The sibilant hiss of the rocket makes my heart seize up. My knees buckle; I find myself collapsed on the ground. The blood drains from my face as the green signal flare gently pops and indifferently drifts toward the bunker line. I give out a sigh of relief. “Goddamn, Lupton, you are one nervous schizoid, boy,” jokes Moschkin.

“That goddamn hissing noise freaks me out. Every time I hear it, I think about that butterfly bomb the VC booby-trapped in the Ho Bo. The hissing scares me shitless, especially when I do not expect it.” I stand up; Moschkin laughs.

“Ha, ha, very funny Moschkin,” I mock; we continue walking.

Late that afternoon, I am sitting alone in the hootch when Greko saunters in strutting like some sort of jive anus brain. “Hey, Lupton, do you have anything to read?” he asks me.

“No,” is my baseless reply. I could give a shit less what Greko wants.

“Give me something to read, or I’ll kick your ass, Lupton.”

“Hey, I ain’t got anything, so get out of here.” He ignores me, sits down on Boutoff’s bunk, and ruffles through some magazines he finds next to the bed. I just ignore the asshole.

Sergeant Prine stomps into the hootch from the other end and walks right up to me. He is buck-naked. Standing immodestly in front of me without even a towel, the hairy bastard demands to inspect my M16. I turn around to see Greko pretending to look at the magazine, but I know he is keenly interested. I think better of telling Prine to fuck off. I cannot trust Greko for any reason, no matter what. Reluctantly, I reach up and take my rifle off the two nails used to store it and hand it to Prine. He snatches it rudely, pushes out the retaining pin, and breaks it apart with a vengeance. He is determined to find something wrong, but he has to look thoroughly to find a spec or two of dust inside the housing. “Clean this,” he points, “I’ll be back in five minutes,” then he stomps out of the hootch. I turn and glare at Greko who is still pretending to leaf through the magazine.

He looks up at me. “What?”

“Goddamn you Greko,” I swear vehemently.

“Hey, I wouldn’t have said anything. You know me,” he defends.

“Hit the fucking road, Greko. Go on, get out of here.” He lamely retreats with his purloined magazines. This was my big opportunity to smash Prine up side his head with the M16 and beat him senseless. I could claim he wanted me to suck his dick, but Greko spoils my prospect of getting away with it, the goddamn shit head. I do not wipe down the rifle; I replace it on its hooks.

Within a few minutes, Prine stalks back into the hootch, this time fully dressed. There are others in the hootch now and this tempers his disposition. He inspects my weapon insipidly then gives it back to me without a word and leaves.

Everybody in the fourth squad is optimistic when rumor floats around that he is transferring to Vung Tau, and we are getting a new squad leader. As naively as a newborn babe, I declare that nobody could be worse than Prine.

Two days after my return, Captain Mayone is history. In his stead is the new fresh faced, starched fatigues, straight from Texas, gung-ho West Pointer, an eager beaver to be sure - Captain Cole.



**Figure 2: Captain Cole (left) standing with unknown in front of A Company's mess hall - 1967.**

Once again there is no ceremony marking the change in command, the Captain just appears at the morning formation. Sergeant Letoto reads out the Captain’s first new general order, “No personnel shall keep, on their personal possession or in their footlocker, any explosive devise. This includes hand grenades, smoke grenades, hand signal flares, Claymores, or any other pyrotechnic devices. All such pyrotechnics shall be stored in the ammo dump until they are needed on operations.” Letoto goes on to make several more general-announcements then dismisses the company. Like the others, I take my hand grenades and smoke grenades from by web gear, and carry them to the ammo dump. There are several large boxes where we deposit our used grenades. I can see the tin handles of all the grenades are mangled and twisted; some levers are broken off completely rendering the grenades useless. Finding grenades with useful handles has always been a problem; new grenades become increasingly difficult to find.

To our great joy, we learn Sergeant Prine is leaving. Somehow, he gets a transfer to Vung Tau; how lucky can the truly worthless be. God really does take care of fools,

idiots, and drunks. Everybody in A Company would give his right nut for a transfer to an in-country R & R city. For a going away present, we all wish Prine the biggest dose of Black Syph that Vung Tau has to offer.

As with Mayone, Prine disappears like a fart in the wind. Two days later Sergeant Rod brings around his replacement. He is Sergeant Kobayashi who reportedly had some REMFy type job in Vung Tau. The rumor is he comes to the 25<sup>th</sup> Division just so he can qualify for the CIB. He is older than Prine; he is remote and uncommunicative. I want to make friends with him at first, but I keep telling myself not to get too close to this NCO. He appears uncomfortable around us, for Kobayashi does not know very much about the infantry. There is no avuncular mentoring, and it takes only a few days before everybody in the weapons squad hates his guts as much as we ever hated Prine's guts. We nick name him The Jap.

Out in the field The Jap hangs around with Sergeant Rod, the Lieutenant, and O'Shaughnessy, and he rarely comes around to inspect our gun position after we are finished digging our hole. He hassles us to dig it deeper, wider, and lastly, to put a sandbag roof on it, always some goddamn bother. We fuss and fume with him, but he is insistent then he retreats to the platoon CP. It is not too long before O'Shaughnessy comes over to our foxhole pissing and moaning about Kobayashi wanting him to dig a deeper hole, a bigger hole, and finally Kobayashi insists he make a sandbag roof too. We tell him we are glad he is stuck with the asshole and not us. O'Shaughnessy stomps back to the CP pissed off to no end, and with blisters yet to come.

The company pulls a security sweep in the afternoon, and we join 1<sup>st</sup> squad as their machine gun. Captain Cole leads us into the surrounding villages where it is very difficult to maintain contact with the man on our left and right. After we struggle slowly through the ville, the line discombobulates when the Captain attempts to swivel the company to starboard. He becomes frustrated with the lethargic response of the men. This is not what he expects from his Ranger training, and his aggravation grows to a boiling point when he tells Sergeant Wright where he wants a left flank created at the end of the line. "Sergeant, I want you to move back a few paces, there, move back to form a flank." Sergeant Wright blankly stands pat, confused with the Captain's orders. "Goddamn it sergeant, go over *there!*" Wright remains motionless, blinking stupidly. The Captain loses his cool and charges through the hip deep water swearing vehemently at Wright. Half way there, Cole reaches into the water all the way up to his shoulder, grabs a hand full of mud, and violently throws it at Wright. "Sergeant, you are relieved," he bellows as he splashes through the ever deepening water, "*you,*" he points to Becker who stands with mouth agape, "*you* are in charge, *you,* Sergeant, are *relieved!* Now, get over *there!*" Pointing with his wet hand, Cole's face turns beet red. Becker wades over to where the Captain wanted Wright to go. Captain Cole then struggles mightily back through the water to his RTO and First Sergeant Letoto who is flabbergasted at this ineffectual exhibit of leadership. With the left flank now adjusted, the formation slowly moves out.

The Captain decides to break the company into two groups; first and third platoons will reconnoiter in a slightly different direction from second platoon. If one comes under fire, the other will not be so far away that they cannot render assistance. Several hours later, we hear gunshots to our right. After consultation on the radio,

Lieutenant Holiday orders us to turn and join 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> platoons on the double. By the time we arrive, the action is over.

Patterson took a round in his heart when he broke through a hedgerow. There ensued a brief firefight until the VC broke contact and escaped.

After they fly his body out of the field, we hold up beside the village waiting for the battalion's recon platoon to join us. As they draw near, they begin a recon-by-fire. I watch them advance on our left flank wondering why they are firing so much. We all yell at them to cease fire, but they ignore the order. After another burst of fire, we hear a loud scream from behind a hedgerow in front of me. As if on cue, the firing stops. Recon platoon's mindless shooting hits FNG Sergeant Nicholls through both hips while standing inside a hootch. Our medic, assisted by the recon platoon's platoon sergeant, carries the bloodied Nicholls back to our line. After they evacuate him in recon's APC, Captain Cole and the recon lieutenant engage in a testy discussion. The recon platoon changes direction and moves off by themselves. We continue our search.

The company moves out into the open paddies. Farther out in the field we come across a farmer, dressed literally in rags, who guides a plough as his buffalo traverses the small paddy. When the formation halts, this gives me a chance to observe the intelligence of a dumb ungulate. Every time the farmer reaches the edge of the paddy, he must withdraw the plough to swivel the buffalo around and start the next furrow. The bovine does not miss the opportunity to quicken his stride before the old farmer has a chance to push the plow deeper into the muck where the added strain slows the buffalo into a laborious trudge across the muddy field. We watch the buffalo repeat this routine for several furrows and compliment the noble beast. The damn thing is not so stupid after all.

The company resumes its march through the wet soupy expanse of rice paddies. We head toward a forlorn solitary little hootch that is slightly elevated from the surrounding mire. To live out here would be disheartening, for there is virtually nothing except this tiny thatched-roofed house built next to a scraggily shade tree. As we draw near the house, the integrity of the line falls apart as each man picks a route he thinks will take him around the little house the easiest and not drown on the way. I angle to my left, electing the higher ground, and then draw up next to the house where I observe Sergeant Atkinson who has foolishly chosen the low road. The ground looks level; there should be no problem, so he thinks.

A mamasan looks on as Atkinson sinks with every footstep until he is nipple deep in water, and he holds his rifle above his head with both hands. We stop to watch our 2<sup>nd</sup> squad leader sinking deeper and deeper. As he walks, he shouts at the old gook women, "Don't you dare laugh mamasan. You laugh just one time, and so help me God, I am going to come out of here and bop you up side the head." We burst into hysteria; mamasan stares blankly, clueless of our euphoria. Sergeant Atkinson takes a few more steps and begins to gain altitude. He struggles up the submerged incline to stand in front of mamasan; cascading water makes him resemble a wrung mop. I am deeply afraid for mamasan, but she never cracks a smile.

Upon arrival at our base camp, we discover there are two doughnut dollies waiting to entertain us. This is the only amusement offered us since some stupid little 13-year old go-go dancers let us yearn for them at Schofield Barracks. Danny Kay and



Vickie Carr played the battalion in July. They ate at C Company's mess hall, but A Company was in the field at the time, and we missed their show.

One of the doughnut dollies is cute while the other one is flat chested and sports the shadow of a mustache; what the hell, they both have round eyes, and we like 'em. I can only imagine what they think of us when we straggle inside the barbed wire, hot, sweaty, and drained from the loss of Patterson. I give them accolades for maintaining an upbeat demeanor as they play a silly parlor game with men who sit cross-legged on the ground in front of them in soaking wet pants, sweat pouring down their faces, and tired anguish in their eyes. Only the guys who were not out in the field participate with any aplomb. The rest stare blankly at the nice-looking girl. Later, we all agree they are both sweethearts to travel to a shitty place like this to lift our morale. Bless their hearts each one of them.

Two days later, as I sit on a rice paddy dyke, I notice the machine gun is looking a tad bit crusty. I mention this to Smith only to hear him gripe that in Germany they gave him time to clean the machine gun. I retort, "This is not Germany. You need to keep cleaning the gun even at times like this when you take a break." I tell him, in Hawaii, his ass would be in front of the CO if he showed up for an inspection with the gun in this condition. The warning is lost upon his dumb ass. He snarls back at me and does nothing.

We begin humping along a grove of rubber trees. I walk beside a line of tall, thick bushes when there are several shots fired. Another shot cracks over my head; I hit the ground before the next gunshot snaps between Smith's head and me. A few more shots come in our direction when suddenly Captain (Gung-Ho) Cole waltzes up behind me and begins shooting through a low spot in the bushes. I get up quickly only to glimpse a hunched over VC running with an M1 Garand rifle disappearing into the rubber trees before I am able to bring my rifle up to fire. Cole keenly gallops ahead of us to see what all of the yelling is about. His RTO and FO trail behind him.

Later I learn Sergeant Rod sees the VC crouching next to a rubber tree. He brings up his rifle and pulls the trigger; only the round is a dud. The VC hears the click, turns, fires a few rounds toward Rod, and then shoots in my direction; after that, Cole starts shooting at him, and he quickly escapes. By the time Rod reloads, the gook is history. It happens that quickly.

We continue until we are deep into thick underbrush. The platoon comes upon a very substantial coppice. I have the choice of following an oxcart path or delving into the thicket. I elect to take the easier path and continue following the man in front of me. I turn around to see Stemac and the rest of 1<sup>st</sup> squad entering the undergrowth. I can hear them thrashing through the sticks and branches until shooting inside the coppice begins. A bullet cracks over my head. I hit the ground straight away as more shots come in my direction. Seeing inside the shadows from the sunlit trail is impossible, so I cannot shoot. "Cease fire," bellows someone from the head of the line; then there is a lull, I hear footsteps running away from us into the thick trees.

"Stemac is hit," Lynwood yells, "hold it, I got 'em." Lynwood carries the lifeless Stemac over his shoulder out of the coppice, past me, to where the medic waits. Stemac is dead. "The VC was waiting for us in a tree. When Stemac looked up, I saw the gook point his weapon and fire point blank into the top of Stemac's shoulder blade; the bullet went through his heart." Lynwood looks wired, "The fucker jumped down and ran. I

could have fired, but I knew I would have hit our own men. There was nothing I could do.”

“Fuck,” I think to myself, “I was in front of Stemac, it could have been me who was killed if had I ventured into that thicket.” I am very subdued as Holiday makes us move away from the thick tangle of trees to await the medivac to fly out Stemac’s body.

“Did you know Stemac only has three days left?” Buxton asks me.

“I didn’t know that. What the hell is he doing out here?”

“He didn’t know he was short until this morning. His paperwork came through for a compassionate reassignment late yesterday. He asked Lieutenant Holiday if he can go in with the supply chopper, but Holiday said no.”

“He said no?”

“Yeah, he said he needed the personnel.”

“Holiday is an asshole,” I scowl, “Stemac has been here 8 months now. This stupid ass lieutenant has only just arrived. The fuck head is only here to get his ticket punched.”

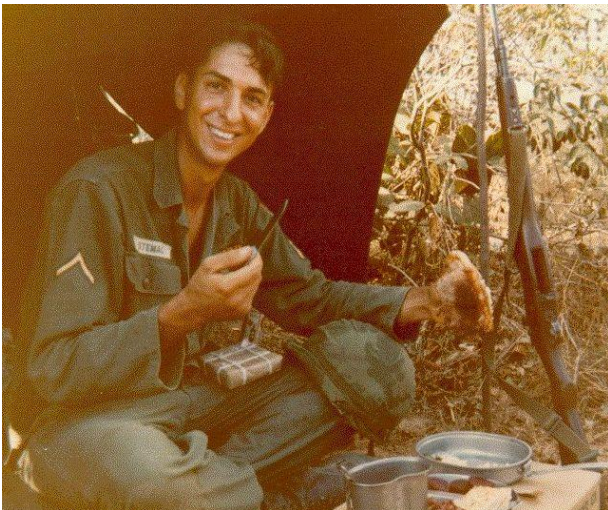


Figure 3: Stemac chows down early in 1966.

The company continues the sweep. This is August; the heat is oppressive as we break out of the thick woods and slowly trudge across a sunny open field. A sniper takes a few pot shots at the rear element. I kneel in response. The heat rises in waves to lap my face. Sweat drips from the tip of my nose drop after drop onto my boot where the leather absorbs the droplets one after the other. I must breathe deeply to stay conscious as I lug up my ammunition when the formation resumes its progress. All I can do is slog through the heat until we move into a larger field to sit and wait for the helicopters.

I sit sweating on a dyke praying there will be no sniper fire to impede our extraction. I am lucky to be on the first lift. I lick the sweat from my lips as the chopper climbs above 200 feet where the air is cooler. Sitting back sedately, I ponder the events of the past few days as the helicopter vibrates gently beneath me. Watching the countryside shimmer in the afternoon heat, I say to no one in particular, “This has been one fucked up operation.”

We return to Cu Chi and walk back to the company area in small groups. It is late in the afternoon when I dump my rifle on my bunk, hang my web gear on a nail, and head

to the mess hall. There is no shade in the mess line. By the time I get my food, I feel like I want to fall over. After putting my tray down on a picnic table, I take my canteen cup and venture out behind the building where there is a big ice cooler. I discover a single large block of ice in it. I take my knife and stab at the corner until a large piece chips off. I break the smaller piece in half and pop it into my canteen cup when I hear, "Lupton, what are you doing?" Coming out of the mess hall after eating his chow, is Lieutenant Holiday.

"I am hot, sir, I really need a cold drink, so I am getting some ice....," he interrupts me using an officer's pompous logic.

"If everybody did that there wouldn't be any ice left at all, now would there?" I want to tell him not everybody is out here pilfering ice, but I know this will not go over well.

The cooks are lazy. They make a large batch of Cool Aid with water from the company water trailer then they 'might' put in a large chunk of ice where it floats on the surface. The liquid at the top of the jug gets cold, but it might take hours for the ice to chill the bottom of the container; the cooks are too stupid to know this, so all the enlisted men are stuck drinking tepid Cool Aid. The officers have ice in their drink pitchers. I know this because I pull enough KP in the dining room.

"I am hot, sir. I just want a cool drink."

"Put it back, Lupton." The prick, he stands before me with his hands on his hips as if he just caught me snitching his cookies.

"Yeah, sure, sir," I unceremoniously dump my chunk of ice back into the cooler and slam shut the lid while he continues looking at me. I walk back into the dining room, but I keep watch through the window screens until he disappears between the hootches. "Fuck him," I muse. I dash back to the cooler, retrieve my ice, fill my canteen cup, and enjoy my nice cool drink. As I drain the last of my cold Cool Aid, I finally feel comfortable despite the stifling air inside the mess hall.

The FNG next to me asks, "Where did you get the ice, Lupton"?

"If I told you, then there wouldn't be any ice left at all, now would there?" I feel smug using Holiday's moronic logic, "here, you can have the rest of mine. I'm finished." I plop the diminished ice cube into his cup.

"Thanks man, shit, this tastes much better cold." The cool drink is just what I needed to perk me up, and I head back to clean up my gear.

The first thing The Jap makes us do is take all of the grenades from our web gear and return them to the ammo dump then he lets us clean our weapons in peace.

Afterwards, we swill beer until 2<sup>nd</sup> platoon has to staff the bunker line. I am good and loaded by the time we populate the bunkers, and I will admit, I am negligent in staying awake. Kobayashi catches me napping while I am leaning against the side of the bunker pretending to be awake. On my second watch, I am still sleepy, and he catches me again, so I climb on top of the bunker where he cannot sneak up on me. Tonight he is the phantom sergeant materializing at inopportune times. Normally, he sleeps the night away at the platoon CP, and we never see him.

After the morning formation, the officers and senior NCOs make us stand by our footlockers while they rummage through our stuff. Kobayashi searches mine. He digs around under my clothes and finds a smoke grenade I forgot was there. He looks at me and tosses it up and down in his hand a few times but does not say anything to me. I hear

nothing about it for two days until Kobayashi calls me out of the hootch and tells me to come with him. I follow him to the back of the orderly room where he points to the door. "Go inside and report to the captain." I do not know what is going on; maybe the CO is going to recommend me for a medal, or something.

"Sir, Private Lupton reports." I stand at attention in front of Captain Cole as if my asshole is sucking air.

"Private Lupton, on August 20, 1966 I gave you a direct order to remove all of your hand grenades, smoke grenades, and other pyrotechnic devices from your personal possession. Two days ago, you disobeyed my direct order by hiding a smoke grenade in your footlocker. You have the right to remain silent and the right to council if you so decide to decline an Article 15. If you do, you will be given a general court-martial. What do you elect to do?" He reads from a prepared text without looking at me. I am confused as to the consequences of my refusal to sign. A court-martial can put you in LBJ to serve bad time. The closest I ever came to getting into a shit storm was when Captain Curbow got pissed at me for not having my boots bloused while on KP.

"I...I..."

"Well?" He is impatient.

"I guess, I guess I'll have to sign, sir," I stammer meekly. The grenade was there because finding any grenade with an unmangled handle is nearly impossible, it always has been. I did not disregard anybody's direct order, I merely forgot about the stupid thing; it has been in my footlocker for months.

"Sign here," the Article 15 comes already typed up; he knew I would cave, "you will be fined 30 dollars this next payday, Lupton." He is so cocksure of himself. This West Pointer shoving his military justice up my high school dropout ass, it must give him great poise. If ever there were a conceited, patronizing cocksucker, Cole is it. I sign where he indicates, and he dismisses me. It is over that quickly. Thanks for listening to my side of the story Captain Prick.

I exit the hootch where I find The Jap standing within earshot; he sports a simper that tells me he enjoys partaking in this little matter. As I walk past him, I stare into his eyes and say to myself, "Okay, I will be waiting for you, you little slant-eyed prick." If this were 1970, the dickhead would find the pin pulled on a CS grenade under his pillow tonight, which would be his last warning before a frag grenade rolls underneath his bunk with the pin pulled.