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I am the only man left who sailed from Hawaii still living in the hootch. Old Timers leave one at a time and replacements filter in to replace them until I can look around the morning formation and see only pink new faces. All of the officers who sailed with us are long gone. All of them reassigned to the rear after a mere six months on the line. Lieutenant Schnizer remains with the company after the 19th for a little while and then joins the valueless at Battalion, we never see him again, and the company never replaces Lieutenant Williams to my knowledge.

I am jealous when Moschkin gets lucky and begins working in the Division PX. He complains about stomach pains and the doctors cannot find anything wrong with him, diagnosing his illness as psychosomatic. How lucky can you be? I am still waiting for action on my 1049 and turning into a nervous wreck each passing day. I keep having feelings that my luck will run out at any time now.

In the afternoon formation, First Sergeant Letoto gives us a lecture about race relations. "I have heard black people talking that the white soldiers are lording it over on them too much. On the other hand, I have heard white soldiers complaining that the blacks are getting too much rank, too much power. I do not want to hear this shit anymore. Whether you are white or black does not make any difference in the Army. We are here to do a job." I have been in this unit 12 months now and the First Sergeant finally acknowledges a race problem, unbelievable. Sergeant Letoto feels he has put this issue to rest and then turns his attention to the Old Timers, trying to sooth our ragged nerves as we cope with near short-timer status. "Every time I go out in the field, I get a premonition that I will take a round the head, right here." He taps his forehead between his eyes with his finger; the group chuckles at his subtle inference. "I know how nervous you men are, but you have to take everything as it comes, don't worry, this will be over soon." He looks around at us somberly, "Okay?"

"Okay," we reply, but without confidence.

Our tour is getting long in the tooth and everybody is cantankerous. I walk out of the hootch the next morning, waive, and say hello to the company driver. We have been friendly in the past and have swilled many a beer in good humor. "Fuck you, Lupton, you give me any more of your shit, and I'll kick your ass!" He appears serious too as he stomps past me on his way to the mess hall. He gives the impression he woke up on the wrong side of the bunker this morning. I become wary of everyone.

Sergeant Letoto disappears from A Company, and C Company's First Sergeant replaces him. The battalion Sergeant Major reassigns Letoto to some other outfit because he feels the morale of A Company will plummet if the Viet Cong kill him. Sergeant Letoto is upset about his reassignment; he feels he has done something wrong but can do nothing to stop it. Reluctantly, and without ceremony or good byes, he leaves A Company for the Division REMFdom abyss.

Sergeant Rodriguez is the only senior Old Timer NCO leader remaining. Except for Sergeant Rogers of the weapons platoon, the other platoon sergeants are dead or wounded. Sergeant Rod soldiers on through all of these travails right up to the end in early January 67 when he rotates.

Few Old Timers become chummy with the FNGs. Federations cluster by time in country rather than by cohorts, and rank isolates the enlisted hoi polloi even farther. I

cannot remember any of the replacement's names, even our ammo bearer who I defacto promote to assistant gunner because I do not want to be tethered to Smith when the shit hits the fan.

I ask Sergeant Rod if I can get off the machine gun crew. When I try to justify my case, I bitterly refer to Kobayashi as a son of a bitch. "I don't like it when you call my sergeants a son of a bitch, Lupton," and for my foul invective, that is the end of that. I am fated to the gun crew forever.

I still shiver when flying in the helicopters; I must squeeze my rifle between my knees and hold my elbows tightly against my sides so the FNGs sitting on either side cannot feel me shaking as we ride to Tay Ninh. I do not want the FNGs to know I am scared shitless every time we go up in the choppers.

A Company is pulled security around an artillery company for three days. After landing, we busy ourselves with filling sandbags. The artillery captain tells Sergeant Rodriguez that he expects his men to cover their bunkers with two layers of sand bags before sunset. Presumably, this demand applies to us as well, which it does, and so we toil away through the hot afternoon.

Scads of Vietnamese kids gather around us as we dig a hole and fill our sandbags. The kids offer to help us bag dirt for the price of a few cigarettes, so we employ the older ones who can handle a shovel. The work progresses smoothly throughout the afternoon, and we accumulate a large pile of sandbags to build our bunker.

Smith opens a can of c-ration cookies for a snack but all he manages to do is attract a horde of hungry little gook kids who keep nagging him for chop chop. "You souvenir me chop chop," they badger Smith, "GI, you chop chop me."

"Okay, here, hey, hey take it easy. Get outta here you; you already got one you little shit." Competition is fierce when the food is proffered. Many hands grab for the prize and turf wars are common. Older siblings end up with the goodies, and the little ones look hurt and forlorn, but none will share with them. After only a few minutes, Smith boils over in frustration, and still they want more, always more. "Di di mao you little fuck heads, get outta here!" Smith jams his remaining C's back into his pack and waives his arms hysterically at his antagonists, but the Munchkins know this game better than he does. They stay put hoping he will break down and part with something else. This teaches us to never to eat in front of third-world children.

Several shots ring out from a distant tree line. The rounds are not in our direction, but they are loud enough to sound threatening; we grab our rifles expecting a shoot out. Some of the little kids di di at the first sounds of rifle fire, but most are tenacious and want the cigarettes promised for their labor. Smith chases them outside of the barbed wire we strung earlier, and he has to stay there to keep them from infiltrating back inside. The little bastards want their wages, but Smith elects to welsh on the deal. He yells at them again when more bullets fire from the tree line. More kids flee but still others demand payment. They manage to pop the pack of cigarettes out of his fatigue jacket pocket and hurriedly divvy them up. Smith grabs for his pack but he is too late, it is empty. The gaggle begins dispersing except for the unlucky ones who wound up with nothing. Smith shouts at the top of his lungs to get the fuck away from here, and then threatens to shoot them all. He stomps back to us. "Those little bastards," he yells in frustration, "one little shit grabbed my dick. He asked me if I sucky dick. No, I do not

sucky dick, you sucky dick, ya little shithead. I knocked his hand away and punched him on the forehead, the little bastard.”

“What’s the matter Smith; those little kids try to whoop your ass?” I cannot let it pass; he looks too ridiculous with his ruddy complexion growing ruddier in the waning sun light.

“Fuck you, Lupton,” he sneers in return. Now he is out of cigarettes and has to humble himself to bum a few from me.

We are almost finished with the second layer of bags on the roof of our bunker when the artillery captain arrives to inspect the line just after the sun sets. We show him how we built a pair of wings that curl backwards on either side of the bunker so the extra men can fight from there. By my reckoning, we have two rows of bags, one protecting the men on the outside of the bunker, and the bunker wall protecting the gun crew on the inside. He appears happy with our work and continues his inspection.

The artillerymen string commo wire to all of the bunkers; each bunker gets a handset that connects us to the artillery fire control bunker. Every half an hour, we make a sit rep by mumbling a few words to prove we are not sleeping while on guard. Because there are six of us on this bunker, we only have to pull two hours of guard, and we consider this dick duty.

The cannon cockers are a schizoid bunch. I spend my guard listening to their persistent conversation on the landline. The fuck-you frogs are still looking for mates and one black voice thinks he hears something plopping in the wet rice paddy in front of him. “Fire Control Bunka, dis is Bunka 6, ahs hears somethin in fronts o’ me. What should ah do?”

A moment of silence passes before the laconic answer comes over the line, “Pray.” I fall off my sandbag laughing. It sounds as if I am listening to the Amos and Andy Show. These artillerymen are scared shitless. This tête-à-tête continues until I get off guard, and I tell my relief to keep listening because I think Bunker 6 is just about ready to shit his pants. The night remains quiet with the moon emerging shortly before dawn.

Around mid morning, Sergeant Kobayashi comes around and insists we tear down the fighting wings; he is adamant we need a double wall using those sandbags. We get no room to explain that three of the men can use the wings as fighting positions, and the bags are part of the double layer the artillery captain wants. “I want those bags stacked against the bunker wall,” he impatiently demands, insisting one of us begin working. I stand insolently with my hand on my hips, staring at him, but not moving. “Smith, start moving those bags, right now!” he will not take no for an answer. Smitty can endure no more. Erupting into a conniption fit, he begins tearing down our carefully crafted auxiliary walls and throwing the bags vehemently against the bunker. His vile curses are alarming, and I will have to admit, his flare-up frightens me. Sergeant Kobayashi retreats to the platoon CP while Smith continues cursing and railing until the job is finished. Smith is exhausted, he breaths heavily and must sit down to cool off.

“Goddamn I hate that son of a bitch,” he expounds as sweat drips down his forehead into his eyes; his ruddy complexion darkens into a deeper flush, “that chickenshit bastard...”

“Nice job, Smith,” I congratulate him offhandedly.

“Fuck you, Lupton!”

Our impromptu firebase borders a 12-foot wall next to a Buddhist Temple. The site is a former slaughterhouse and the flies are terrible. They are so ubiquitous I have to leave the cool confines of the bunker to get away from them. Being careful to stay out of sight of our CP bunker, I wander over to one of the 3rd platoon's bunkers to find someone I know. I recognize Beltz, who made buck sergeant after the 19th, and go shoot the shit with him. He recounts his last night's adventures with a boom-boom girl who solicits him from the end of the wall just outside of the barbed wire. "It was dark, and I was getting a blow job when the artillery captain came around to inspect the bunker line. He did not know I was outside the wire with her until I dropped my load and the whore starts to gag. Then she tripped the trip flare, which is what really gave me away. He ordered me come back to the bunker."

"The captain was here?" I ask pointing to the ground.

"Yeah, he was mad as hell when I got back to the bunker, 'and you, a sergeant in the U-nited States Army. You ought to be ashamed of yourself.' He really got all pissed off when nobody could stop laughing. The Captain just stomped off in a huff."

"What happened to the broad?"

"She disappeared around the wall coughing and spitting," Beltz says casually. Everybody is cracking up listening to his anecdote.

Good things never last in Vietnam and after three days of lazing around on our backsides, A Company must turn over our comfortable fortifications to B Company and fly to the field for a sweep. While packing up our stuff and waiting for B Company to arrive via helicopter, we grumble about having to leave and question why B Company cannot conduct this operation. I compare our Captain Cole to James Cagney's Captain Flagg in *What Price Glory* and lament the day he became our company commander.

While waiting for the helicopters to arrive, I stand with a group from the 1st squad; Becker relays the story of how O'Shaughnessy ventures over to their bunker last night looking for some pussy. "We skunked him."

"What do ya mean?"

"O'Shaughnessy comes walking up glibly announcing he thought he could smell a whiff of pussy and did we know of any around? I told him no," Becker explains with a wiry smile, "and while he is standing talking to us, guys are rotating in and out of the tent hootch to fuck this whore, and he never catches on!"

"You mean he is standing right there, and he didn't smell that pussy inside the hootch?"

"Yeah, we are standing right behind the hootch. Hey, Bishop, did you hear her giggling after I went in there?"

"I thought I heard something."

"That was because I lost my rubber, and when I put my finger in her snatch to retrieve it, she started laughing. She really liked the dick too; as soon as I crawled in, she grabbed my dick, and got me hard; she was eager to fuck." Hilarity erupts amongst the group of men. "I could hardly get my rubber on fast enough."

"Where the hell did you find her, anyway?"

"An ARVN came around at dusk to pimp his wife to us. We gave him 30 dollars MPC, or five bucks each, and she agreed to stay with us for the entire night."

"No shit."

Becker continues his narrative. "After everybody was finished with sloppy seconds, we discover she cannot walk," the group chuckles and smirks at their sexual prowess, "and we were afraid of what would happen if the captain caught us with her inside the wire. Bishop comes up with the best solution when..."

"Yeah, yeah," Bishop interjects excitedly, "I said if she still cannot walk by early morning, what we can do is put her in front of the Claymore, and if she does not crawl away by day break, we blow the Claymore claiming we saw her infiltrating the line." Everybody explodes. This is the funniest goddamn thing I have ever heard.

"Yeah, but the ARVN showed up and took her home," Becker concludes ruefully.

"What happened to O'Shaughnessy?" I ask.

"Oh, he went back to the platoon CP none the wiser and without any pussy." Another eruption follows, "boy was he pissed this morning when somebody told him what happened last night. Now he won't even talk to us he is so pissed off." Becker has us laughing so hard nobody can talk for several minutes.

Two lifts of helicopters fly in B Company as we stand next to the tiny airstrip bordering our former bunker line. Just after landing the second load, it starts raining heavily. Our first lift sits in the chopper waiting to go when the whine of the jet engines suddenly diminishes as the raindrops swell into a thunderous down pour. The choppers sit idling to wait out the deluge.

I turn to stare at the B Company men huddling inside our nice dry bunker, comfortable and contented. They blankly watch us standing next to the helicopter with Captain Cole and his retinue sitting inside the Huey, dry and relaxed. Our lift must stand in the pouring rain, and with envy, I look back and forth at the two groups of dry and blissful men. During the height of the cloudburst, I stand looking at the sky, sopping wet, hands out stretched, derisively asking the Rain God, "Why is it I who must always atone for your benevolence?" After 15 minutes, the rain slackens, and the jet engines crank up to operating RPMs, the combat assault is underway.

I lie on my bunk contemplating a nice night's sleep when Buxton and another FNG Brother come into the hootch. Buxton sees me lying there and immediately heads in my direction. "Lupton," he kneels down on the floor beside my bunk and asks with brotherly ardor, "Will you go on my ambush tonight, please? I'll go on yours next time." He is drunk; I can smell the beer on his breath. I look up at his companion who is also soused, and for some stupid unknown reason I agree. The ambush is only an LP just outside of the wire and nothing happens.

The next night my gun crew has to go with Sergeant Motta on a similar ambush. I walk over to 2nd squad's tent and tell Buxton he needs to go on this ambush for me. He refuses to discuss it. "Why you goddamn two-faced nigger," I think to myself, "I should go get my two boxes of ammunition and throw them into your face as you lie there." The ambush is forming outside our hootch, "Come on, you said you would go on my ambush last night," I scowl at him, but still he lies on his bunk shaking his head no. I can bitch to Sergeant Kobayashi to high heaven, but I know it will do me no good. I curse myself for being so brainless; I gather up my web gear and ammo boxes, and join the patrol embittered and rueful.

The Vietnamese run a tiny barbershop next to the opening in the wire at the end of B Company's bunker line. We stand waiting our turns and talking about what happens to us in the field never thinking any of the barbers can understand English even after an

ambush killed the VC colonel who used to run the shop. After I get my haircut, and a brief neck massage, I browse the souvenir stand next to the barbershop. One of the headquarters FNGs tells me he heard the First Sergeant say I am going to Hawaii. "Don't tell anybody I said so," he cautions.

"No, no, don't worry, I won't say a word," I reassure him. Hot damn, I am going to live! I look skyward with open palms, "Thank you God, thank you." Maybe they will assign me to Ft. Shafter, such good fortune, or even better yet, I will become permanent party at Ft. DeRussy on Why-kee-kee Beach! I cannot get back to the company area fast enough and a couple of hours later the company clerk summons me to the orderly room where he unceremoniously hands me orders for Hawaii. Nobody in the orderly room appears happy for me, but fuck 'em, I am leaving on October 23, 1966 – and they are not. I look at the calendar and count back to today, "I have only 12 more days left in Vietnam!"

"Get outta here," the clerk tells me tersely. He is a replacement and has many more months left in country. I do not care though; I finally have my orders to leave Vietnam. Back at the hootch I count my remaining days again, just to make sure then I go find Sergeant Rodriguez to tell him my good news. The First Sergeant already told him, and he apathetically congratulates me, for I am now a genuine short timer. Normally, you are a real short timer when you have only three days left in country, but Sergeant Rod cuts me a break. I will not have to endure the drudgery of pulling details and running patrols from Cu Chi while the company waits for word to go on another operation.

The first thing I want to do is get rid of my rifle, steel pot, and field gear. Above all, I want to cast off the burden of my machine gun ammunition to a replacement. The millstone is finally gone from around my neck; I cannot believe this day has come.

By my reckoning, if I get rid of the rifle then nobody can tell me to go outside of the wire. It all makes sense to me, and I quickly brush off the dust from my weapon and waltz over to the supply room to turn everything in. Sergeant Fitch has weaseled his way into becoming the company's armorer. He pops my bubble when he rejects my M16 as too dirty, pointing out where he finds specks of dust inside the bolt housing. I fume and fuss but he is will not deter, and I have to go back and spend some more time on it.

Sergeant Fitch thwarts me again on my second attempt when he peers down the barrel, finds miniscule particles, and hands it back to me sarcastically joking how Numbnutz here wants to turn in a dirty weapon. I am stomping out the door when from the corner of my eye I see Sergeant Prine sitting on the bench next to the door with one knee crossed over his other knee like a girl. He sports a stupid simper on his face like the cat that just ate the mouse. Adding insult to injury, I see he is wearing platoon sergeant's strips. I cannot believe it. Only two months ago, Prine left for Vung Tao as a pariah, and somehow he manages to bullshit his way into a promotion. I refuse to look at the stupid ass jerk and think what a great time this might be to whack the bastard upside the head with my M16, but I am short now and do not want to screw myself up over an asshole like Prine.

On my third attempt to dump my rifle, Fitch deigns pity and accepts my weapon and field gear.

I feel as if I am almost home safe. However, it is not to be. Freeman, who made buck sergeant after returning from the hospital in August, finds me hanging out in the

hootch while everybody else is working on the bunker line and orders me on a trash run to the dump. "Hey, Freeman, I don't have a rifle anymore. You will have to find somebody else," I inform him and return to my loafing.

He does not buy it though, "I'll get you a rifle, Lupton. Come on get going. The truck is already loaded." Shit! I have to follow him to his hootch where he scrounges a rifle and a bandolier of magazines from somebody else, and with Linwood, we climb into the back of the already loaded duce and a half for the trip to the dump.

After driving through the main gate, we turn left and follow the dirt road running along the perimeter of the compound. Shortly after, we veer right onto the dump road where I see a make shift roadside stand selling chunks of cut up water buffalo. There are a million, zillion flies perched on the reddish slabs of meat hanging from ropes. The truck kicks up a plume of dust that envelops the meat market. I cannot believe anybody eats that shit after sitting in the sun all afternoon. Behind the stand, lies the slaughtered carcass of the bison with its guts splayed over the grass.

We pass through the gate of the dump, past the MPs manning a jeep surrounded by a dozen kids. An MP shows us where to back up the truck, and the three of us begin throwing the trash off the back of the vehicle. There are multitudes of scavengers throughout the dump scattering clouds of flies in search of anything edible or valuable, which to them means just about anything Americans throw away. I almost spear a little kid with a two by four when I kick it off the truck; the MP chews me out explaining the kid works for them retrieving military papers, personal letters, and such before the VC get their hands on it. I apologize profusely, for I did not mean to impale the little tyke with the plank, and then resume tossing the junk out of the truck.

"Hey, look what I found?" Linwood discovers a hand flare that appears unused. We do not want to throw this to the Viet Cong, so he asks the rest of us if he should shoot it off.

"Hey, go for it," I reply. He takes off the cap and places it on the other end. I turn my head away and duck before he smacks it with the palm of his hand, launching the flare. We look up and wonder why we cannot see the flare burst, and then slowly drift down beneath its parachute. "Where did it go?" I ask.

"I don't know," replies Linwood. Suddenly, we blanch when the MPs shoot a short burst from their machine gun. When nothing else happens, we resume unloading the truck. Then an MP walks up to us and curtly asks if somebody fired off a hand flare. Linwood replies handedly, "I did, so what?"

"Goddamn you," the MP is furious, "you almost got somebody killed!"

"What? I just shot up a flare that's all." Linwood is confused.

"Get down here. Come with me," the MP orders briskly. They lead Linwood away to the stockade as he grumbles about chickenshit MPs. I never find out if he got into a shit storm with Captain Cole or not.

Clearing post is a time-honored ritual in the Army. I casually walk around to various commands gathering up my pay records, health records, personnel records, and stopping off at the PX, not part of the cleaning process but so what. Stopping at the beer garden makes the job even more pleasant. In addition, I must obtain a clearance from the re-up sergeant. I have too much time left in the Army to bother the division re-up sergeant, but I am required to get his signature on a piece of paper indicating I appeared

in front of him for my reenlistment orientation. He just signs it and waves me away. No problem Sarge, color me gone.

Staying away from the company area allows me to avoid another dump detail. I stop in the PX to buy some PFC chevrons, and a few 25th Division patches to sew on my right shoulder when I get to my new duty station. As I stand in line to pay for my purchases, I hear a familiar voice. "Lupton, loan me a dollar, will ya?" It is Fagan. He does not want to borrow a dollar, he want me to give him a dollar, the same as stealing it. People like Fagan do not borrow money they keep it as a matter of course, and besides, I am not going to be around long enough to get my money back. I ignore his request and decide to rub some of my good fortune into his face by telling him I only have 5 days left. "Aw, come on Lupton, loan me a dollar, will ya."

"Forget it, Fagan. I need all of my money for my trip to The World. Get somebody else to give you a dollar." I cannot believe the audacity of this motherfucker. His friend stands blankly looking at me, but I am resolute; this time I am not a nice person. I would not give this jerk off a dollar if my life depended on it. He scowls, turns, and his big Negro buttock prances away and that is the last I ever see of him.

I walk over to the souvenir stand next to the barbershop and have the Vietnamese girl sew my chevrons and patches on my uniforms. While I am there, I buy some cheap, cheap souvenir dolls and return to the company area via the long way around. I pass the prophetic sign hung over the entrance of the 25th Supply and Transportation Battalion. It reads, "DRIVE CAREFULLY THE LIFE YOU SAVE MAY BE YOUR REPLACEMENT" After reading that, I superstitiously cross the road, so I can see the oncoming traffic before it hits me.

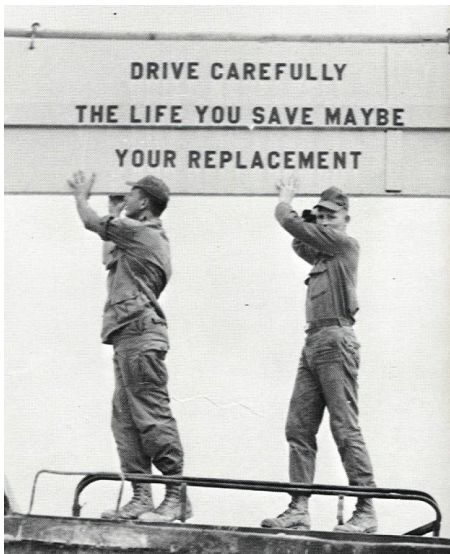


Figure 1 - This is the main gate of the 25th Supply and Transportation Battalion main gate - 1966.

On October 22, I wake with transformed vigor. I eat breakfast for the last time in the mess hall, noting how pedestrian the food tastes. After chow, I stuff the last item into my duffle bag and head out the hootch door. Turning to look for the last time before the screen door slams shut, my eyes fall upon the concrete slab where Sergeant Price wrote

the names of the ill-fated 3rd squad. “What about the machine gun crew, Sarge, are you gonna add our names?”

“Fuck you, Lupton!” he snaps and a week later, they are all dead. Maybe it is good after all that my name is not there.

The rest of the platoon is already working on details. Most go to the bunker line but some stay in the company area to build duck walks out of 105-ammunition crates.

I meet with Sergeant Dalton and one other man, all of whom have brothers in Vietnam and are traveling to Hawaii. We hop on the morning convoy to Saigon and take our last nostalgic ride into the city where the truck deposits us at the Peninsular Hotel. After getting a room and some lunch at the hotel, we process our paper work in the afternoon. I refuse to leave the hotel lest the Viet Cong kill me on my very last day in Vietnam. The rooftop café and bar does just fine.

The next morning we board a bus for Than San Nhut and the driver deposits us at the terminal. A Sergeant tells us to follow him, and we walk directly to the waiting 707. Before I climb the stairs of the Freedom Bird, I look around at the milieu in the terminal for the last time.

Officers occupy the first-class seating by rank then the senior NCOs, junior NCOs, finally the rest of the enlisted rabble happily inhabit the first open seat they come to. The anxiety grows as the aircraft waits to taxi; I want to run up to the cockpit and tell the pilots, “Let’s get going before the Viet Cong close the airport with mortars!” When the wheels lift off the runway, there is a rollicking cheer as fists thrust skyward and everybody starts shaking hands with the men beside them. Finally, we are departed!

Our elation moderates as the plane banks toward the east. I look through my window to see the afternoon sun glistening off the shallow, stagnant water of the rice paddies surrounding Saigon. The comforting low roar of the jet engines gives finality to the whole adventure as the plane levels out at cruising speed. I sit quietly, contemplating what happened to me this past year with the Wolfhounds, and I question the merit of the escapade, the trauma, the loneliness, the fatigue, and especially, the boredom of it all.