

From Chicago to Vietnam:  
A Memoir of War





FROM CHICAGO TO VIETNAM  
**A MEMOIR OF WAR**

By  
**MICHAEL DUFFY**





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Cover and interior design by Michael Ebert

Edited by Holly Tri

Front cover pictured left: Dan Duffy, right: Mike Duffy, February 1968 Bearcat, Vietnam.

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Duffy, Michael, 1945- author.

From Chicago to Vietnam : a memoir of war / by

Michael Duffy.

pages cm

LCCN 2016945700

ISBN 978-1-62901-366-4 (pbk)

ISBN 978-1-62901-367-1 (Kindle ebk)

ISBN 978-1-62901-368-8 (epub ebk)

1. Duffy, Michael, 1945- 2. Vietnam War, 1961-1975--  
Personal narratives, American. 3. United States. Army--  
Officers--Biography. 4. Vietnam War, 1961-1975--  
Veterans--United States--Biography. 5. Autobiographies.  
I. Title.

DS559.5.D824 2016

959.704'342092

QBI16-1215

Publisher: Inkwater Press | [www.inkwaterpress.com](http://www.inkwaterpress.com)

Paperback

ISBN-13 978-1-62901-366-4 | ISBN-10 1-62901-366-8

Hardcover

ISBN-13 978-1-62901-367-1 | ISBN-10 1-62901-367-6

Kindle

ISBN-13 978-1-62901-368-8 | ISBN-10 1-62901-368-4

ePub

ISBN-13 978-1-62901-396-1 | ISBN-10 1-62901-396-X

Printed in the U.S.A.

3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

# DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my deceased brother, Dan Duffy, who served his country in Vietnam with the 82nd Airborne Division, 1967 to 1968. It is also dedicated to the anonymous three Vietnamese women and one young Vietnamese boy who risked their lives by helping me carry a wounded American soldier from a battlefield in the early morning hours of June 7, 1968.

This book is also dedicated to the officers and enlisted men of C Battery 7th Battalion 9th Artillery. These men, some draftees some volunteers and some career Army, served their country in Vietnam. They didn't run to Canada to avoid the draft or go AWOL to avoid Vietnam. They, like me, were unremarkable men who came from every part of the United States and every ethnic background. They performed the job the United States of America asked them to do. They did not deserve the bitter unwelcome reception most of us received upon returning home.

I also wish to dedicate this work to my late wife, Peg Duffy, my human spellcheck. I love you, Peg.



# AUTHOR'S NOTE

Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.



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## Chapter 1

# THE ARRIVAL

My plane arrived at the Cam Ranh Bay Airbase in South Vietnam about 2:00 a.m. The air was muggy and hot. We disembarked and were herded onto olive-green buses; wire mesh and thin metal bars covered the windows. I thought the wire and bars were odd. Why do they have to worry about us escaping from the bus? Where could we go? I was quickly told by the driver that the wire and bars were used to keep hand grenades from being thrown into the bus, not to keep us on the bus. “Oh,” I said.

The military base at Cam Ranh Bay sat between two bodies of water, the South China Sea on one side and Cam Ranh Bay on the other. I scanned the night sky. I saw flares floating down above low mountains just west of the bay. The flares were shot from artillery cannons and fluttered down, hanging from small parachutes. I was scared one moment, then I talked myself into a state of calm the next. No one on the bus said a word; we were tired from the long flight and anxious about fighting in this Asian war.

The bus made a short run and dropped us off at a large building. We walked into a great room, where our green, look-alike duffle bags were being piled. The bags formed a small hill. Men began clawing through the bags, searching for theirs. As the bags were being picked up, we were told to form a line, where, we were informed, bedding

and a barracks assignment would be issued. Once in the barracks, we would spend the night in a fitful sleep, filled with fear and a human clock still ticking on U.S.A. time. I stood and watched as each man found then pulled his bag off the pile. The end came when I was alone standing next to the luggage drop without a bag. I mumbled to myself, “The fucking army lost my bag. Now what do I do?”

I asked the private on duty about any other bags that might be arriving.

“Nope, that’s it, sir,” he said.

“What do I do?” I asked.

“Sir, walk down to the lost bag office, about a block from here. Maybe your bag fell off the luggage cart. If they find it on the tarmac, they send it to the lost bag office.”

I made the short walk to the lost-and-found bag office, my small attaché held tightly in my hand. My attaché held the orders directing me to Vietnam and to my new unit in Pleiku. Purchased in a Chicago stationery store, my attaché was made of heavy Kraft paper, and it had two side gussets, a flap, and a brown, shoelace-type string to secure the flap. I used this attaché as my mobile file cabinet. It also held a letter from the Department of the Army appointing me as a reserve commissioned officer, my army vaccination record, a paperback copy of John Steinbeck’s *East of Eden*, and a small book filled with the addresses of friends and relatives back home. We were told never to pack one’s orders in checked luggage for fear our luggage could get lost. They were right.

“Yes, sir?” said the private on duty at the lost-and-found office.

“My name is Lieutenant Duffy. I got off the flight from McChord Air Force Base in Seattle.”

“Yes,” he said.

“I have no bag.”

“We may have it. They come in at all hours. Do you want to look?”

“Yes.”

This green duffle bag had everything I needed for a year in Vietnam. It held two sets of jungle fatigues, a lightweight jacket, two pairs of green combat boots, socks, underwear, a toothbrush, and a green jungle hat, the kind with a floppy brim. These were all issued at McChord Air Force Base. It even held the illegal switchblade knife I purchased in Colón, Panama, during our jungle training. The knife was black with a four-inch steel blade. It had a silver button in the middle, and when pushed, the blade switched out and was held rigid by a locking device. I pictured myself in combat, fighting hand to hand. As the enemy was getting the best of me, I would ask him to wait a minute as I reached into my pocket, pulled out my switchblade, and found and pushed the silver button, and then I'd finish him off, just as they did in those black-and-white war movies that my brother, Dan, and I watched on weekend nights. I just hoped that Charlie,<sup>1</sup> would cooperate with my fantasy and wait until I was able to find my knife. But now it was gone.

The private at the desk showed me through a set of double doors into a huge metal building the size of a high school gymnasium. The room was filled, wall to wall, floor to ceiling, with lost bags. It was a sea of green duffle bags, and every bag looked the same. “My God,” I mumbled. “How do I find my bag?” The private looked at me, smiled, and calmly said, “Sir, no one ever finds his bag.”

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1. Charlie is short for Victor Charlie, or VC, the Viet Cong insurgents fighting the U.S. forces in Vietnam.

I thought for a moment as I faced the wall of green duffle bags. Then I turned to him and asked, “Can I take someone’s bag that didn’t get claimed, maybe a bag that has been here a month or two? I need a change of clothes.”

“No, sir,” he said, then he shook his head back and forth. “What if I give you someone’s lost bag tonight and then the owner of that bag shows up tomorrow? I’ll lose this job and be out in the field walking in the muck that very day. Sorry, no dice. I can’t risk it, sir. This is too good of a job. Plus, I go home in forty-six days and a wake up. Nope, can’t risk it, sir, sorry.” Then he turned and marched away.

I walked over to get my barracks assignment for the night and thought about the socks and shoes that I needed. I was clothed in dress khakis with shiny black oxford shoes. I wore a short-sleeved shirt with a glossy black nametag that read “DUFFY.” I couldn’t function in Vietnam like this. I needed green fatigues and combat boots like everyone else.

I entered the barracks, found my bunk, hung up my khakis, and fell into a fitful sleep. It was about 4:00 a.m.

The next morning was oppressively hot and humid. I awakened with a throbbing headache, pulled myself out of bed, put on my dirty khakis, and then walked to the headquarters building to report for duty. As was, and still is, military custom, each arriving officer reported to the Officer in Charge, or OIC. The OIC reviewed orders and then arranged transportation to one’s new unit. My new unit was the Fourth Infantry Division in Pleiku, Vietnam. An indifferent company clerk glanced at me and told me that the OIC would be at his desk in about an hour. I walked out of the office and toward the front gate of the base. Off in the distance, I saw hills, the same hills that I had seen

as dark silhouettes the previous evening. The hills were now a soothing blue-green in the soft, humid morning light.

I watched as three young Vietnamese women pedaled past me on bicycles. They wore straw hats pushed back off their heads. The hats were tied to their necks with broad, colorful ribbons. They wore shiny black waistcoats with fat fabric buttons. Their loose-fitting, black pants flapped in the breeze. I watched their long, black hair fly in the wind. They talked and laughed as they passed me. I wondered to myself, *Who are they?* They were, I found out, Vietnamese civilians working on the Cam Ranh Bay Airbase. Employing civilians on the American bases was a common practice. The employees, usually women, because the men were off in the South Vietnam Army, would work on the roads, in the mess halls, or in the laundry. Any job was welcome—it brought a few piasters<sup>2</sup> into their homes.

I glanced at my watch, the watch my parents had given me when I graduated from Officer Candidate School in Oklahoma. It was a Bulova with a black face and a gold-plated back. The watch was engraved “LT. DUFFY, 14 MAR 1967.” My hour was up, so I began my walk back to the OIC office. “Welcome to the Republic of Vietnam,” a stiff-faced captain said to me. I saluted and handed him my orders. He quickly looked them over, then he told me there was a change. I would not be heading to Pleiku as my orders stated; instead, I had a new assignment to a unit near Saigon.

“Why the change?” I asked.

“They need men down south. There’s a lot of enemy activity in and around the Saigon area. The brass think the VC are up to something. You’ll be leaving in thirty minutes on that plane.”

---

2. The piaster was the currency of the Republic of South Vietnam.

He looked out his window and pointed to a C-130<sup>3</sup> aircraft with its four engines running. Then he asked me why I was still in my khaki-colored shirt and pants.

I told him my lost luggage story. He said to find some green jungle fatigues as soon as possible. “Here are your new orders; get over to the plane now. Wait, before you go, here’s a booklet on Vietnam. Read it.”

The book was a small, thin paperback. It had Vietnamese phrases and useful words to help with directions or making a purchase. The book discussed the monetary system in Vietnam; it mentioned that the U. S. military needed to keep our “greenback” dollar out of the Vietnamese currency system. It also gave a brief history of the Vietnamese people and their culture. The Vietnamese culture dated back thousands of years, and it read, as visitors to this country, we should respect their culture. After reading a few pages, I stuffed it into my attaché and ran to the waiting plane.

The pilots were peering out their windows, and they looked worried. The flight crew was unfriendly. I boarded quickly. We were headed to Saigon.

About twenty GIs were crowded into a small rear-passenger cabin, along with boxes of military equipment. We sat on webbed nylon benches facing each other. The plane taxied and then took off like a rocket, banking to the left over the South China Sea, then back over land. The flight was wrenching. The plane pitched to the left and right, and soon I became dizzy and lightheaded. The pilots set a course for Saigon’s airport, Tan Son Nhut. I glanced at the other men on the plane, and I thought, *They all look so young*. At the age of twenty-two,

---

3. C-130 is a four-engine turboprop military aircraft.

I was probably the oldest on the flight. But all the men on this flight did have one thing in common—they looked frightened.

Soon the pilot's voice welcomed us aboard. "If there is any trouble, there are plenty of spots to land along the way," he said. "Don't worry." I thought, *What does he mean by trouble?*

I turned my head to look out a small window. I watched as we flew over rice paddies, palm trees, and rubber plantations. The countryside was stunning; my eyes were filled with bright, yellow-green foliage and dark, shadowy blue-greens; occasionally, I saw a red-tile roof. Our flight was short, and soon I heard the plane's engines throttle down.

As we began our descent into Saigon, I glanced out the window and noticed thick, black smoke rising from different quarters of the city. Soon the plane plummeted downward, spinning my stomach. The plane's right wheels hit the ground with a slam, then the left wheels banged down, rattling the cabin and the men inside. The pilot began lowering the back door and then he made a jarring stop. Brilliant sunlight streamed into our cabin. I watched a young soldier run toward the now open back door. He was waving and shouting frantically. "Get off the plane! *Over there! Over there!* Have your orders out, move, *move!*" I ran off the plane onto the tarmac.

The young private pointed to another soldier with a clipboard. He was glancing at our orders and then directing us to different locations on the air field. This place was a madhouse. We were standing on the field with planes, helicopters, jeeps, and trucks everywhere. They had their engines racing, and the noise was earsplitting. A fine red dust began filling my eyes, and they began to burn. I could hear the sound of small arms fire. I instinctively ducked; I saw smoke rising over a long earthen wall. After three nights without sleep and the jarring plane ride, I was bewildered and dazed.

The private with the clipboard grabbed the orders from my hand. He quickly looked them over, then using his finger, he pointed to a waiting helicopter. You could not hear voices clearly. Messages were given with the point of a finger, a scream, or a wave. I looked back at our C-130 aircraft as its four engines roared and launched it back into the sky; a cloud of dust blew into our faces. Once again, I was told, but this time with a harsh shout and a pointing finger waving back and forth in my face, “Lieutenant, *run!* Move! The base is under attack, and you need to get the hell out of here.”

I turned from the private and began a sprint to the helicopter, only to catch my foot on a block of wood. I fell to the tarmac. My hands were outstretched to break the fall. My attaché went airborne, and my knee caught a corner of the wood block, ripping my khaki pants. The palms of my hands tore and now were bloody and filthy. I got up and collected my attaché and myself and ran to the waiting Huey helicopter.

The helicopter pilot was at his controls, and the blades were pulsing. He watched through a side window as a few others and I ran to his craft. A second anxious GI standing at the helicopter’s open door glanced at our orders as we climbed aboard. He yelled to me, “Get off in Bien Hoa. It’s the first stop.” He looked me over and then asked if I had a weapon. I shook my head and said no. He cocked his head and said, “Well, sir, you better get one, and sir, I would get out of those khakis. You look like a target.” He turned and sprinted off.

I quickly took the end seat. The pilot rushed the engine. Our chopper tilted forward, then it began a slow rise over an earthen berm separating the airport from the shanties of Saigon.

As we gained altitude, I heard more explosions, but I couldn’t judge where they were coming from. I sat with my head turned toward the open helicopter door; if I vomited, I didn’t want to do it inside the

cabin. The few hours since leaving Cam Ranh Bay were a mass of confusion, and I was feeling ill. We flew over a thick cloud of black smoke rising from a burning vehicle. The young private's words back on the tarmac resonated in my head. He said I looked like a target.

It was January 31, 1968, the opening day of the Tet Offensive<sup>4</sup> in South Vietnam.

The army had removed the large side doors on the Huey helicopters to lighten the load. I was sitting on a nylon bench with a perfect view of Saigon under attack. I saw men, armored personnel carriers, tanks, and clouds of smoke fade into tiny dots as we flew toward Bien Hoa. It seemed peaceful up there, almost safe. I began to relax a little. I glanced at the palms of my hands—they were a mixture of dirt and blood and sweat. I wiped them against my torn pants. The two other men on the chopper were also going to Bien Hoa, but they had army-issue green fatigues. They also carried M-16 rifles in their hands.

They both glanced at me with worried faces and quickly turned away. Soon we were descending, this time not to a tarmac but to a road just outside the front gate of the Bien Hoa Base Camp. The Bien Hoa airfield was under attack and could not be used.

All three of us jumped from the helicopter. Bags were tossed out the door by the crew chief, and the Huey was off. As we stood there bewildered, we heard a voice from the base shouting, "Get your ass down!"

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4. The Tet Offensive was a massive attack by more than 80,000 Viet Cong and North Vietnamese combat troops launched against the United States and South Vietnam forces on the eve of the Vietnamese lunar new year, called Tet.

I fell to my knees, then to the ground in a prone position. I crawled toward the front gate on my stomach while gunmen shot at us from shanties across the street. I saw puffs of dust pop around me as bullets hit the crusty, dry earth. Now I was scared, but it was the voice from the bunker that struck fear in me. As we neared the gate, we jumped up and ran to a sandbagged bunker manned by two sentinels. I tumbled into the bunker as a young private fired an M-60 machine gun toward the shanties. Hot brass casings burned my forearm as they spit from the weapon. When he stopped firing, we began pummeling questions at the two GIs. They looked exhausted and filthy. One man never took his eye off the road. He was hunched over the machine gun. “What’s going on?” I shouted.

One of the young privates in the bunker began talking rapidly, stopping only to take shallow breaths. He looked at us and said that Charlie had pulled off a major assault that morning, all over the country. He heard the VC had attacked the American embassy in Saigon. They also were fighting in the Cholon neighborhood, near the Saigon Race Track, and they had infiltrated the Tan Son Nhut Airbase—the base we had just passed through. He went on to say that Charlie had gotten into the camp—no one knew how many VC had breached the coils of barbed wire or where they were.

He said that Charlie was still inside the camp. I asked if “the camp” meant this camp. He took a long drag on a cigarette, turned to me, and nodded. “Where do we go from here?” I asked.

“I dunno, sir. If you’re new, you need to check into that building over there.” He pointed to a dirty wooden building about a block away.

“Is it safe to go?”

“Shit, sir! I dunno, I dunno if it’s safe here. I’ve been in this bunker going on twenty-four hours. Early this morning they tried to come across that road.” He pointed to the road we had just landed on.

“We shot the shit out of ’em. It was so dark I dunno if I hit anyone, but I know we got that.” He pointed to a dead water buffalo in a ditch just beyond the road. The carcass was beginning to bloat in the sun. “We’ve been shooting at the snipers across the road,” he said. “They’re hard to see ’cuz they hide behind the shanties, shoot at us, then they run to another spot and shoot at us again.”

He looked at me and said, “Sir, you better get a weapon.”

Just then the private hunched over the M-60 machine gun began firing, producing an earsplitting roar. The spent metal cartridges spit out of the machine gun, and the smell of gun powder filled the air. He stopped and shook his head, but he never took his eyes off the road.

A weapon, I thought. I need more than a weapon; I need a place to relax. I was a nervous wreck.

I made a run for the small, wooden building and barreled through the door. Inside the building it seemed eerily calm. A clerk sitting at a gray, metal desk looked up at me almost as if he were in a stateside office. In a quiet voice, he calmly asked, “Can I help you, lieutenant?”

“I’m here to check in.”

“Okay, just a minute.” He walked into an office behind his desk. Soon, the day officer appeared wearing a steel pot helmet and a flak jacket. He looked at me and then, with a question in his voice, asked, “Lieutenant Duffy?”

“Yes,” I answered. He took the orders from my hand, laid them on a desk, then pulled a ballpoint pen from his pocket, and on the margin of my orders wrote Service Battery<sup>5</sup> 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion<sup>6</sup> 9<sup>th</sup> Artillery, Bearcat.

He pointed at his writing and said, “That’s your new unit. They will be in Xuân Lộc tomorrow delivering ammunition. It’s a twenty-minute helicopter ride, and you can get a ride in the morning. Nothing is flying out today.”

“Where do I sleep?” I asked.

“Over there,” he said, pointing to another building out a window.

“You can get something to eat at the mess hall. Sorry, I gotta go.” He ran off.

I looked at two signs nailed over the door of his office. One read: War Is Our Business. Business Is Good.

The other sign read: Don’t Knock the War. It’s the Only One We Have.

The mess hall was closed. I walked over to the barracks and found a bunk. I lay down and began to think about my home, Chicago. I had left almost a week ago in the same khaki uniform I was wearing. It was dirty and torn, and I was filthy.

I thought about my brother, Dan, who was already here in Vietnam, somewhere. I thought it might be Củ Chi, a military base northwest of Saigon. I wondered how he was and if he was okay. I thought of my old girlfriend, who had dumped me. I imagined she was in her dad’s

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5. A battery is a unit of the U.S. artillery usually consisting of six guns or cannons and manned with about one hundred men. Service battery refers to the supply-and-support unit, which delivers food and ammunition to the artillery battery in the field.

6. A battalion consists of four batteries with a fighting force of about 500 men.

enormous Buick with her new boyfriend parked down at some Lake Michigan beach. That thought was depressing. I thought about the old ladies at the draft board, short and fat in dumpy print dresses. I was drafted before the lottery; it was called Selective Service. Those ladies were the ones who had put me here.

When a boy turned eighteen, he was required to report to the draft board for registration. My draft board was on Devon Avenue, just west of Clark Street on Chicago's Far North Side. When the time came for me to register, I walked over to the draft board office then up a long flight of stairs to the second floor. Two women were working behind a long counter. The counter was covered with brown linoleum. The office was sparse, with a couple of wooden chairs and a few lights hanging from the ceiling. One of the women looked me over and then asked, "Are you here to register?"

"Yes," I said.

"I will need a little information, honey. Sit tight."

Soon I was called to the counter, where she filled out a three-by-five card using a ballpoint pen. She asked me a question and I responded. "Name? Height? Weight?" When she finished, I watched her place my three-by-five card in a long, gray metal file cabinet filled with other three-by-five cards. She turned and looked at me and said, "All done. You will receive your draft card in the mail. You can go."

When the War Department needed more men, the dumpy ladies at the draft board opened the file cabinet and pulled my name. President Lyndon Baines Johnson needed 200,000 more troops in Vietnam, and I was one of them.

I received my draft notice on a cool November day in 1965. I read it and then reread it. The notice arrived in a long envelope with red and blue hash markings on each side. There was no metered post-

age or stamp on the envelope. Printed in the upper right-hand corner were the words "Postage Paid by the United States Government." I was given a date to report to the Polk Street Induction Center in downtown Chicago for a physical exam. As I sat in the comfort of my parents' apartment reading my draft notice, I could not have imagined the crushing responsibilities and wild journey that the document I held in my hand would bring my way. My life would change forever, and my nineteen years on this earth would not be enough to prepare me for the events that lay ahead.

I began to worry about what branch of service might draft me. I thought that I better take control. If I enlisted in the army and preempted the draft, perhaps I would get some type of specialized training that could lead to a civilian job when I was discharged. I decided to talk to a recruiter.

I took the 'L' train down to the army recruiting office on Wilson Avenue and Broadway in the Chicago neighborhood called Uptown. I knew the draft meant that I could end up in the army or the marine corps or the navy. All of those branches were taking draftees to meet the government's insatiable demand for troops in Vietnam. I didn't want to enter either the marine corps or the navy. I didn't like the macho gung-ho crap that went with the marines, and I didn't want to enter the navy because I had a problem with seasickness. What if I ended up on a ship? I'd spend the best part of each day heaving my guts overboard.

The fellow at the army recruiting office was pleasant. He gave me lots of brochures showing soldiers jumping out of planes, looking at radar screens, and marching in dress green uniforms, all very impressive stuff. The smiling sergeant offered me coffee and a 120-day delay before I had to begin active duty. He said, "Look, Mike, you gotta go

anyway. If you decide to join the army, you can pick your job, plus you don't have to enter active service for four months. Remember, if you take your chances with the draft—well, it's potluck.”

He pursed his lips and shook his head as he spoke. He was as convincing as a used car salesman, down to the schmooze smile, but he was correct—the draft would be potluck.

If I enlisted in the army, a year would be added to my service. The draftees served two years of active duty; the enlisted men served three. After talking it over with my dad, I felt the aspect of choice and some control over my future was worth the extra year.

The next morning, a Friday, I rose early with the intention of driving to work with my dad. Most days we took the 'L', but sometimes on Fridays we drove. As we walked to the garage in the back of our apartment building, we noticed a large truck leaving the alley. The Lill Coal & Oil Company had just dumped a huge pile of coal in front of our garage door. The coal pile would take all day to move into the basement of our building, one wheelbarrow at a time. My dad and I took the 'L' to work.

I took my draft notice with me to show it to my boss, Charlie Tague. We worked in the offices of the now-defunct New York Central Railroad. Charlie was close to sixty years old; he was African American and had spent time in the military, so I valued his opinion. Charlie came north to Chicago from Texas during the Depression. He told me that he had worked a number of odd jobs after arriving in Chicago. Just after Pearl Harbor was bombed and the United States entered World War II, Charlie was offered a full-time job with the New York Central Railroad. It seems the executives in the upstairs corner offices needed a valet, someone to shine shoes, brush their overcoats, and tidy up their offices. Charlie jumped at the chance to

earn a steady paycheck and a railroad retirement pension. Charlie's main duty was sorting and delivering the office mail. When I first started work as the assistant mail boy, I followed Charlie around the office and watched as he cleaned the executive conference table and made sure the ever-present ashtrays were emptied and wiped out. He pushed all the chairs squarely to the table, took one last look at the room, and then closed the door and moved on to his next job.

Charlie was friendly and talkative; his three young grandchildren were his joy. Each day Charlie gave me running accounts of their lives. During a lull in our workday, I pulled out my draft notice, handed it to him, and then said, "Charlie, I just got drafted, and I need some advice."

He slowly read the letter, looked up at me, and said, "Rolling the dice with the draft was a risky business." He told me that he knew a fellow in World War II who had spent the entire war shoveling coal in the boiler room of a ship; it was horrible. He said he would pick a nice, easy profession and enlist in the army.

The word about my draft notice spread quickly through the office; I assumed Charlie told people on his mail round. People I didn't know looked at me and nodded. Everyone knew someone in the service, and most knew someone in Vietnam. Some of my fellow office workers had been to funerals for GIs killed in Vietnam. Hundreds were dying every month.

You couldn't ignore the Vietnam War; it was on TV every night. The news readers offered information on body counts, firefights, new operations, and old operations. Then the pseudo experts would weigh in and give us their two cents—Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and General Westmoreland. They, in turn, would get their

information from the so-called smart guys at the RAND Corporation.<sup>7</sup> Everyone had something to say about the war and the “light at the end of the tunnel,” a.k.a., victory.

Charlie’s advice helped me make up my mind, and the following Monday, I walked back into the recruiting office. I enlisted and took the 120-day delay. That afternoon the recruiter gave me a general aptitude test. After the test, the friendly sergeant served me coffee and handed me a list of jobs from which I could choose; the available jobs were based on my test score, which he told me was quite high. I selected the position of land surveyor. I thought I would be surveying roads in Germany or France, but it turned out that my skills would be used to survey artillery targets. I finished the coffee, left the office, and took the ‘L’ home.

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As I lay awake in Bien Hoa in pitch darkness, listening to explosions, I thought of my draft letter once again. It read, “Greetings, Your friends and neighbors have selected you to join the armed forces.” I thought about those words “friends and neighbors.” These were not my friends and neighbors. These were the two ladies at the Devon Avenue draft board. They reached into their file drawer and selected me. I bet they didn’t draft their own kids, or their nephews, or their neighbors’ kids. I wondered if the other kids my age living on my block had received draft notices: Ira Goldman, Tommy O’Sullivan, or Steve Murphy.

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7. The RAND Corporation was a civilian firm that employed “war experts.” Those experts worked in a think tank for the Defense Department dispensing advice on the war, sometimes good and sometimes bad advice.

Steve lived on the third floor of our apartment building. Probably not. I didn't see any of them down at the Polk Street Induction Center.

I started hearing more explosions. They seemed louder and more frequent and close. I looked at my watch; it was 11:00 p.m. I still had not been issued a weapon. I would be useless if Charlie came through the door with his gun blazing. Useless, I thought. No, I would be dead.

I suspected this might be a very long night, a very long year. As the explosions became louder, they shook my nerves. Even with my artillery training, I couldn't tell if these were incoming or outgoing rounds. I paced the floor; sleep was impossible. Then about 4:00 a.m., I found an empty laundry bag. I took the bag and walked through the barracks. Ever so quietly I began trying on boots at the end of sleeping GIs' cots. I found a pair that fit, then I tried on green combat pants and a green jacket. I took the items back to my bunk and ripped off the name tags. I stuffed my dirty khaki dress clothes and oxford shoes into the laundry bag. Then I put on my new green jungle fatigues and walked over to the mess hall. I was hungry; it was close to 5:00 a.m.

I entered the mess hall in a state of sleep deprivation. I quietly thanked God that the explosions had stopped, and I was feeling somewhat safe in the morning light. All the cooks were wearing steel pot helmets. I noticed a stand of M-16 rifles close at hand. I ate some grits (an army favorite) and drank two cups of awful black coffee. Today I would get on another helicopter and take a short hop to Xuân Lộc (pronounced "swan lock"), a provincial capital north of Bien Hoa. There I would hook up with my new unit. After a quick breakfast, I found my way to the base airstrip. I stood and watched as helicopters flew in and out of the base; there was a small dispatch building near the strip. I walked in and handed the clerk my orders. He told me that I would have to wait; there wouldn't be a flight to Xuân Lộc until

later in the day. I sat down on my new laundry bag and pulled out the Steinbeck book I had started in Chicago. I read it all day until the clerk knocked on his window, pointed, and said, "Sir, that's your ride." I ran to the helicopter; the blades were spinning and kicking up dust. I jumped on, and we were off. We flew over jungle, tall rubber trees, and French villas. I saw an empty swimming pool and thought that it must be the home of a French rubber baron. We landed on a dirt road in the village of Xuân Lộc. It was late in the day. An army private ran to the ship and yelled my name, "Lieutenant Duffy?"

"That's me."

"You need to get off and report to that guy." He pointed to another army private with a clipboard in his hand.

I jumped off with my belongings and ran to the guy with the clipboard.

"Lieutenant Duffy?"

"Yes?"

"Your unit left Xuân Lộc this morning for Bearcat. You will have to spend the night here then get a ride to Bearcat tomorrow. You need to report to the headquarters building; he pointed to a half-moon, corrugated metal hut. I walked over and entered the building; once inside, I recognized someone from the States. It was Sergeant Long from Fort Sill in Oklahoma.

"Hey, Sergeant Long. How are you?" He glanced at me and nodded. I got nothing more from him; he looked absolutely grave. He turned from me then walked away. I wanted to ask him what I could expect in Vietnam, but he never made eye contact. I felt he had other things on his mind, so I left him alone. There was no joy in this place. A sign hung over the orderly's desk. It read: Don't Knock the War. It's the Only One We Have.

This was the second time I'd seen that stupid sign.

I spent the night on a filthy cot in the rear of the building. Our artillery blasted all night long; I got about two hours of sleep. I awakened to more helicopter blades churning. Soon I was told to board one. I jumped on the ship; no one looked at me or spoke with me. The crew looked exhausted and unfriendly. We flew for twenty minutes then we landed at Bearcat. I jumped off alone and began the short walk to the flight office. It was hot and dry and the fine red dust of Vietnam was blowing in my face.

Bearcat was huge. It was surrounded by a ten-foot-high earth barrier. About fifteen feet in front of the barrier, completely surrounding the base, was barbed wire rolled from coils. All the trees were either cut down or dying. It was, I was told, the result of Agent Orange,<sup>8</sup> a type of herbicide. Bearcat had streets and wooden buildings and a Post Exchange (PX), a type of army convenience store. The base also had showers. I hadn't had a shower in over a week.

I found my way to the headquarters building of Service Battery 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion 9<sup>th</sup> Artillery and I reported for duty. It was here that I first met Lieutenant Jack Smith, the executive officer of the unit and my new boss. Jack shook my hand and welcomed me. He had a broad smile on his face.

His smile was the first hint of friendliness I had seen since arriving in Vietnam. Jack stood about five-foot eleven; he had short blond hair and a toothy grin. I guessed he was thirty-five years old. Jack was thin, with a dark tan from the Vietnam sun. He leaned back in his chair and asked where I was from and how I became an officer. He said I looked young for an officer. He offered me a cigarette. I thanked

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8. Agent Orange was an herbicide sprayed by aircraft in Vietnam.

him but declined. Jack began to discuss the position I was about to assume, my duties and responsibilities. Then he asked me if I had any questions. I had only one. What did the name “Bearcat” mean? He told me the base was originally built by the French. The French used the term “Bearcat” as the base radio call sign. The name stuck with the Americans. Jack told me I would start work the next morning as the OIA, or the officer in charge of ammunition, convoys. The convoys consisted of twelve two-and-a-half-ton trucks, two three-quarter-ton trucks, and a jeep. I would ride in the jeep. Our first stop would be the Long Binh ammunition dump, a short drive from Bearcat. Jack pointed to a large map on the wall and showed me the route to the ammunition dump. At the ammo dump, each truck would be filled with pallets of 105-millimeter artillery shells. After the trucks were loaded, we convoyed out to one of three artillery batteries in the field. On the first trip, Lieutenant Smith would accompany me; from then on, I was on my own.

Our convoy left Bearcat early the next morning after my first good night’s sleep in a week. The weather was hot and dry; the road was dusty. The Long Binh ammunition dump was a vast, open-air storage facility filled with high-explosive artillery shells, mortar shells, and other military ordnance. The ammo dump was sectioned off into small lots. Each lot had three earthen walls five or six feet high; there was an opening at one end facing a dirt access road. The earthen walls were designed to prevent an enemy mortar shell from landing in a store of ammunition, exploding, and starting a chain reaction. The walls, although thick and high, did not prevent this. I watched the ammo dump blow up in a white fireball late in February. It was a reminder to us all that the Tet Offensive was not over.

At the ammunition dump I watched drivers on gigantic forklifts drive back and forth, picking up pallets of artillery shells and then pushing them into our two-and-a-half-ton trucks. The drivers on the forklifts were skilled. They would lower the forks as they drove toward the pallet, sliding the two forks perfectly between the two boards that framed the pallet. I watched in awe as they seemed never to miss the opening in the pallets. Later that month I did see a driver miss his mark as we all looked up at a burning engine on a C-130 aircraft. The plane was trying to make it to the airstrip. The forklift driver, his eyes fixed on the smoking airplane, took his foot off the brake. The forklift rolled forward, pinning a man's leg against a pallet of 105-millimeter ammunition. We all heard the leg snap, then came the scream from the young private. He was rushed to the hospital, but we continued loading the ammunition.

Soon our trucks were filled, and we were off. We drove through the village of Bien Hoa and began the fifty-mile trip to Battery C's position in the town of Xuân Lộc. The small villages were crowded with slow-moving ox carts, minicabs, buses, bicycles, and pedestrians. As we drove into the countryside, I noticed an absence of trees and vegetation on each side of the highway. It looked like a desert filled with dying brown shrubbery. Just beyond the dead foliage, the jungle began again. The area between the road and the jungle had been sprayed with Agent Orange. The road just outside of Bien Hoa was newly paved, but after ten minutes of driving, the road changed into broken asphalt and dusty ruts, and our convoy slowed to a crawl. Soon we entered a dark forest of rubber trees. They were beautiful—rows and rows of forty- to fifty-foot-tall trees with large, wide, waxy green leaves. There seemed to be no end to those rows. The rubber tree forest was quiet, with no houses and very few people. I was riding

in the third vehicle from the front. Ahead of us were two three-quarter-ton trucks. Behind us were the large two-and-a-half-ton trucks filled with artillery shells.

A sandy-haired private drove my vehicle, a jeep. In the back of the jeep, an M-60 machine gun was mounted high and well above our heads. A young private had his finger on the trigger and his shoulder to the stock, and he wore a pair of dusty goggles. I was nervous that morning as we pulled out of Bearcat, but the trip went without incident. We rolled into Battery C in midafternoon. I was introduced to the executive officer, First Lieutenant Miller. He told us we would spend the night then drive back to Bearcat in the morning. He said the trucks would have to be unloaded by hand; there were no fork lifts in Xuân Lộc. He went on to say that his battery had been attacked just after midnight, and the combat lasted almost until dawn; the VC had tried to cross the earthen wall bordering the village. He pointed to brass shell casings littering the ground. He walked us to the berm and showed us where they had fought the VC. He said his unit suffered no casualties. Jack and I walked to his hooch and drank a few warm beers, then we tried to sleep. But the howitzers fired all night, and sleep was impossible.

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After a week or two of delivering ammunition, I settled into my job. Our trucks left Bearcat empty in the morning. We drove to the Long Binh ammo dump, filled the trucks, and drove to one of the batteries in the field to drop our load. One night a major in the battalion called a meeting of all the officers. We were told to meet in the officers' club, a modest wooden building. The club held a few tables and a home-

made bar. I walked over to the club and into a crowd of men drinking, talking, and puffing on cigarettes. In the center of the room, the major and his helper were setting up a movie projector. It was a reel-to-reel projector. The projector had two metal spools. The top spool held the film, and after it passed in front of the projector's light, it rolled onto an empty spool just below it. *U.S. Army* was printed in black letters on the side of the projector. The major fidgeted with it for a half-hour while we drank beer and relaxed. Then he shouted, "Lights out!"

We sat down for a surprise. The major barked out, "I slipped into Saigon and purchased a porno movie. It came all the way from Paris, France." He went on to say, "The gook who sold it to me said it was fantastic."

The major was full of himself and proud of his find in Saigon. He wore a large smile on his face. I thought about Major Major, a character in the novel *Catch-22*, a blowhard. They seemed very much alike.

We were all seated at the small card tables around the club. The lights were out, but we continued talking. "Shut up!" the major shouted as he chewed on a cigar. He turned on the projector, which sat on a small stool in front of him. A beam of smoky light passed through the room. The major flipped a switch and the movie started. There were a lot of black-and-white Xs and Os on the screen. Then the film went right to a bedroom scene—no opening credits. It was a black-and-white silent film without subtitles. We found this out when someone asked to have the sound turned up. The movie was made long before talkies, probably in the early 1920s.

On the screen a tall mustachioed man was taking off his clothes. He was puffing on a cigar and walking toward a woman in a Japanese kimono who soon let the kimono fall to the floor revealing her naked body. Their movements on the screen were jerky. Occasionally, we

would get a flash of white light on the screen. We all put our hands over our eyes when this happened. Just as the two porn stars were embracing, the film broke and white light flooded the screen. “Shit!” yelled our host. “Turn on the lights!” A few moments later, he had someone run to his office for tape.

“I’ll have it fixed in a jiffy,” he said.

Everyone started drinking beer again. Twenty minutes passed, and we were told to take our seats and shut up. I thought, *Why couldn’t we talk?* The film was silent. When the movie started again, it seemed to have jumped to a completely different scene. The camera was panning a large tapestry on a wall, and in a hokey special effect, a naked woman moved out from the tapestry and began to walk across the floor toward another woman and the man, who was now lying on a sofa staring at the ceiling. The man held his lit cigar in his mouth; it was sticking straight up pointing at the ceiling. Just then something happened with the projector again, and the major yelled, “Shit!” The image stopped, and I heard a loud ticking sound. The sprocket pulling the movie through the projector was stripping the small squares in the aged film. The major began pushing on a button and soon the image on the screen smoothed out. However, not long after the ticking sound episode, the movie became so jerky it looked as if we were viewing a black-and-white slide show at high speed.

Now we were watching images of naked people jerking back and forth in fleshy spasms. People in our small audience began to laugh. “Shut up!” the major yelled. He took his art film seriously, but his words “shut up” made us laugh all the more. The next thing that happened surprised everyone. The major spilled his drink on himself and screamed, “Ah, fuck!” Then he jumped up from his seat and knocked the projector to the floor. The projector, which was sitting on a flimsy,

three-legged stool, continued to run, but the reel of film fell off the arm of the projector and the light bulb broke. “Turn on the lights! Ah, shit!” the major yelled. “Shit. Get me a towel.”

When the lights went back on, we rubbed our eyes and started drinking beer again and soon forgot about the movie. The major began the job of picking the projector up off the floor. He sent his assistant to find another bulb. He barked, “Fuck, I spent fifteen dollars U.S. for that movie, and I am going to watch it.” His efforts were futile, and the club began to empty out. It was late.

The next day I was told to report to the radio room. I had a radio message from my brother, Dan. He found me in Bearcat and wanted to come down for a visit. I hadn’t seen or heard from Dan since the previous summer. He had a three-day pass. He was to arrive the next day, if it was okay with Lieutenant Jack, my boss. I told Jack about Dan, and he said it was ok, but I would still have to run the convoy to Xuân Lộc. I kept thinking about Dan all night. How on earth did he find me here in Vietnam?

Dan arrived the next afternoon on the mail shuttle, and I met him at our helicopter pad. He had taken the shuttle from Củ Chi, a large military base twenty-five miles northwest of Saigon. Dan was younger than me, but he had preceded me into the army.

Dan and I spent the afternoon talking about his girlfriend, our new nephew, and Vietnam. Dan told me that his hope was to work for the airlines when he was discharged. The army served him well. He was promoted to corporal. We walked together out to the berm. I set up my camera, put it on the auto setting, then I ran back into the picture. I thought I would give a classic combat pose. I remembered seeing a *Life* magazine black-and-white photograph of an American soldier fighting in Italy during World War II. The soldier in the mag-

azine photo had a week-old growth of beard and a cigarette hanging from his mouth. To me it was the classic World War II combat pose. (The fellow's name was Evangelo; his son Nick runs a bar in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Evangelo's picture is plastered on the walls of the bar. Evangelo was even pictured on a 2002 U.S. postage stamp entitled *The Masters of Photography* series.) Well, I didn't smoke, and I couldn't grow a beard, but I could give that cocky, self-confident, tough-guy look. Later, when I had the pictures developed, Dan displays a fine, broad smile, but I look as if I have a large wad of gum in my mouth.

We went on talking, and I told Dan about my plans to attend Colorado College. That is, if I was accepted. I had applied a few months earlier and was hoping to begin school in the fall of 1969. I would wait months to hear the outcome of my application. I told Dan he could leave Vietnam early now that I was there. The army had a policy of having only one family member in a combat zone. However, this was not a given; you had to fill out paperwork and formally request a transfer out of Vietnam. Dan told me he was going to finish his tour with his unit.

The next day, Dan got into the jeep with me. Together we headed for the Long Binh ammo dump to fill the trucks with ammo and then make the trip to Xuân Lộc. We left late, so we had to spend the night and return the next morning. The roads were too dangerous for night travel. Our trip from the Long Binh ammo dump to Battery C in Xuân Lộc was uneventful. After our evening meal in the mess hall, we began talking with some of the men. They told us that the night before there was another attack on their compound. They were up all night fighting and fending off the assault. While we talked, we heard gunfire from the street outside the compound. An ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) soldier was in the street firing his weapon.

He was drunk. A group of ARVN soldiers followed him. He turned a corner and was out of sight, but the gunfire continued.

The next morning, after very little sleep, Dan and I had a breakfast of black coffee and waterlogged eggs; it was horrible, as usual. We walked to our waiting trucks, now empty. I began the ritual of checking with the drivers to make sure that each truck started. Then I walked around the trucks looking for a flat tire or an open tailgate; I found none. Sergeant Judd ran over to me when all the men were accounted for and the trucks were running. He said, "Sir, we're ready to roll."

The lead truck, a three-quarter-ton, pickup-sized vehicle with a machine gunner in the back, began slowly moving out of the camp past the sentinel, then past the many wood-and-tin-roofed shanties of Xuân Lộc. Women and children looked us over as we snaked through the narrow streets onto Highway 1 and toward our home base, Bearcat. A few of the children waved, but the adults turned away and walked into their huts. Dan and I were together in a jeep just behind the three-quarter-ton truck. We had a driver and a fourth person with us, Lieutenant Smart. He told us that he had some legal business in Bearcat, "papers to sign in front of a lawyer." Lieutenant Miller told me why he was really traveling with us. Lieutenant Smart needed to see a doctor at the Bearcat medical clinic, not a lawyer. He had a common Vietnam ailment that usually went away after a few days, but his case was a bit stubborn. The most bothersome symptom of his ailment was a painful burning sensation when he urinated. It seems that Lieutenant Smart had spent a night out in Saigon a few weeks earlier. He had had a tryst with one of the many bar girls on Tu Do Street, and now he was paying for his night out. He looked awful.

Our convoy picked up speed as we left the city limits and no longer had to worry about ox carts, bicycles, or pedestrians. There was little

traffic on the road. The previous night's attack had kept many civilians indoors, not knowing if it was safe to travel. About halfway back to Bearcat, just as we neared the edge of the Binh Son rubber plantation, one of our trucks broke down and stopped the convoy. We were stuck in a low point on the road with a small hill on one side, perfect for an ambush. Sergeant Judd muttered, "We're sitting ducks here." Sergeant Judd asked me in a nervous voice, "Sir, what should we do?" This situation put me on the spot. I didn't want to stop the entire convoy. I thought for a moment, then I foolishly told Sergeant Judd to keep the convoy moving. This was the wrong decision. I realized that after the last truck passed my small jeep. I suddenly had a panicky feeling as I watched our convoy vanish down the road. Sergeant Judd and the mechanic began working on the motionless truck. There were now four vehicles stopped on the road and eight men. My stupid decision left us vulnerable. I walked over to the mechanic, looked him in the eye, and using all the self-control I could muster, I calmly said, "Get it running."

Sergeant Judd looked scared. He was a short-timer with only a few weeks left in Vietnam. He had been through a lot. He knew how dangerous this road could be. His fear triggered more concern in me as I told Dan to watch the rear part of our now very small convoy. Dan ran to the last vehicle. Then he chambered a round in his M-16 rifle. Using his thumb, he pushed the safety to the off position. Sergeant Judd kept telling the mechanic to hurry up. "We need to get out of here." It was eerily quiet. As the mechanic worked on the disabled truck, we all raised our heads to the sound of a small motorcycle coming our way. The sound of the two-cycle engine got louder, and soon we watched a middle-aged Vietnamese man ride by us on a beat-up moped. He slowed as he passed and looked over our situation. His face was expressionless. He looked, I thought, like a young Ho Chi

Minh. He had a weathered brown face with deep, wrinkly lines and a long, wispy beard. He gunned the moped then sped off in the direction of Xuân Lộc. Now Sergeant Judd looked frightened. "Sir," he said, "that guy on the moped could tell Charlie we're broken down. We need to get out of here."

I looked at Sergeant Judd and said, "I know that." I glanced at Dan. I now viewed him as my little brother, whom I had just sent into a dangerous situation, to guard the rear of our convoy alone. My concern was for him. We could be attacked if a squad of VC found us. I cursed myself for letting the convoy continue. I was filled with doubt about my reasoning and my decision. I barked at the mechanic, "How long?"

"Sir, I'm working as fast as I can." Thank God he was calm. Sergeant Judd walked over to tell me once again that the guy on the moped was going to tell Charlie we were broken down. He also thought it was important to remind me that I never should have let the convoy go ahead.

I decided not to bother the mechanic again because even the slightest interruption might slow his work. I literally bit my tongue. I pulled my army-issue .45 caliber pistol out of its holster, chambered a round, and then I scanned the small hill next to our position. My heart was pounding. I glanced at Dan with worry then at Sergeant Judd, who was now pacing back and forth along the road. Lieutenant Smart was still in our jeep grimacing in pain. The mechanic finished his work, jumped in the front seat of the truck, and pushed the starter. It turned and began to pop and backfire, then it started! *Oh, thank God.* The sound of it was a breathtaking relief. The motor roared to life as the mechanic gunned it, keeping the rpm's high. He didn't want it to stall again. We jumped into our vehicles and were off. We raced

through the open road, past rows of rubber trees. After ten minutes speeding down Highway 1, we caught up with our convoy.

We made it back safely to Bearcat, but I was exhausted from the stress. This was my first test of leadership in Vietnam. It turned out okay, but I know that Sergeant Judd thought the “green lieutenant” had made the wrong decision. He would tell others. I didn’t want that; I wanted to be liked by the men and the officers. This need to be liked would get me in trouble later in the year.

My brother, Dan, flew off on the mail shuttle the next day. We both said we would write each other, but we never did. I received a letter from my mother later that year saying that Dan had arrived home. He had purchased a new car, a Pontiac Firebird, and had applied for a job with Continental Airlines. He still had a few months left in his army tour, and he would spend those months in South Carolina. I smiled to myself, glad that he was home and happy for him.

A few nights later, I awakened to sirens going off. Our battery commander ran into my room and yelled at me to get into the bunker. The bunker was a four-foot hole in the ground with sandbags piled high on each side. It was just next to our sleeping quarters. The bunker had a metal roof with sandbags stacked three deep on top. We stood in the bunker and heard the sound of incoming rockets or mortars. I was too new in Vietnam to tell the difference, but I would soon learn the difference. After a short while, the captain turned to me and said, “Lieutenant Duffy, go out to the berm with the enlisted men and watch for an attack.” I wasn’t ready for this. I wanted to stay in the bunker, where I thought it was safe. I looked at our captain and asked, “Outside, sir?”

“Yes, get out to the berm.” I left the bunker and ran to the berm. My breath was short. I had a deep fear of the enemy climbing over the

berm wall with guns firing. When I arrived, I found the berm filled with troops from our battalion, all lying on the ground. Everyone was pointing his weapon toward the barbed wire. One fellow had a starlight scope, a telescope that gave us grainy ghost images in the dark. "Can you see anything?" I asked him.

"No, sir."

Another volley of rockets flew over our heads and crashed into the compound. They came from the dense jungle in front of the camp, but to determine the point of origin was impossible. I thought, *They could fire all night and we would never be able to get a fix on them.* The VC would set up 122-millimeter rockets, either Russian or Chinese. They would use logs and tree branches as launching pads, a type of sawhorse that propped the rocket up off the ground. The rockets were pointed at our position, then the VC would light the fuse. By the time we figured out where the rockets were coming from, the part-time Viet Cong soldier/part-time farmer was back at home. Even with our high-tech starlight scope, the countryside was too flat and full of dense jungle to find the launching pads. I looked behind me. One of the rockets had hit the camp generator. It was burning. We watched the coils of barbed wire all night. The sky lightened to a sunny morning. The attack never came; neither did sleep.

The next night, our captain said he wanted to teach me pinochle. We sat together at an army-issue green table, and he began the process. While he dealt the cards he began asking me questions, "Where did you go to college?" I told him that I had never gone to college, except for a few hours at Chicago's City Colleges. There was no money in our house for college; after high school I began working. He went on quizzing me. "If you didn't go to college, then how did you become an officer?" I told him the story:

In the 1960s, if an enlisted man serving in the army had a high school diploma (and many did not), a good score on the army's IQ test, and then passed a review board, he was offered a chance to attend Officer Candidate School (OCS). After my ten-week survey course at Fort Sill in Oklahoma, I was asked by my commanding officer if I would be interested in OCS. A quick assessment of an officer's pay scale (much higher than a private's), and the thought of improving my living conditions on base made me quickly accept. The other men in my survey class who were offered OCS turned down the army's invitation, and they were all promptly sent to Germany, where during their off hours they chased girls in the German beer halls. They sent me pictures with beers in their hands and women on their arms. I, on the other hand, sealed my fate. After OCS, I had a direct path to Vietnam.

Our captain was a Dartmouth man. He had gone through the school's ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corps) program. He told me that he was considering the army as a career, and it was important for a career man to punch his ticket here in Vietnam. His life seemed relatively safe in Bearcat. While on duty in his office, he pushed papers and wrote letters home. He sent the junior officers like me out to run convoys up Highway 1. In the evening he played pinochle, drank beer, and then went to bed. Bearcat was never overrun while I was stationed there, and short of a few rocket attacks, it was a great place to spend your year in Vietnam and, as the captain said, "get your ticket punched."

The captain leaned back in his chair, looked at me, and then asked, "Did you get drafted?"

I told him the story of getting my draft notice, then quickly enlisting in the army's survey school to avoid the marines or the navy. I told him about the 120-day delay before reporting for duty. I mentioned a trip to New Orleans for Mardi Gras.

“Tell me about your trip,” he asked.

I began my story:

I rode the Illinois Central Railroad from Chicago to New Orleans. My dad secured a pass for me from his employer, the New York Central Railroad. When I arrived in New Orleans, I was met by my sister, Irene. She was spending a week in town with her new husband and offered me a few nights of lodging and a chance to see the city and experience Mardi Gras. Early one Monday morning, after two days of wading through drunks and beer cans, I began hitchhiking east to Florida. I wanted to experience the white sandy beaches and lie in the warm Florida sun. I had about fifty dollars in my pocket. Through a series of long and short rides, I ended up in Pensacola, Florida. I checked into the Pensacola YMCA Hotel. It was an aging but well-maintained wooden building painted white with a red roof. From the center of the lobby ran long halls like spokes from a wheel. At the end of each of those long halls were the rooms. The clerk asked me if I wanted a ten-dollar room or a five-dollar room. I took the five-dollar room and headed down the hall with the key. When I opened the door, I saw two beds. One bed was empty; in the other bed a middle-aged man was sitting up reading a newspaper and puffing on a cigar. I excused myself and told him the clerk probably had given me the wrong key.

He looked at me and said, “No, no, you must have checked into a five-dollar room.”

“I did, but how did you know that?” I asked. He told me the five-dollar rooms were doubles, and he was my roommate for the night. “This mistake happens all the time.” He looked harmless, and I was tired, so I got into my bed and fell asleep.

The next morning my luck changed. Just outside of Pensacola, I got my first long-distance ride. A trucker driving a large eighteen-wheeler slowed and stopped. I picked up my small plaid suitcase, the one I had borrowed from my sister, and I ran to the passenger door.

I sat on a long bench seat and looked over at a gear-shift lever with a dozen positions etched in white on a black knob. The trucker had the radio blasting country and western music. He asked where I was headed. I told him I was going to enter the army in a few weeks. I assumed he knew going into the army probably meant going to Vietnam. After a half-hour we stopped for breakfast, and I reluctantly paid the bill. Now I had only forty-four dollars in my pocket. From the back of the cab, the driver pulled out a six-pack of Budweiser, tall cans, a half-quart each. He placed the beer between us and offered me one. As we drove east on the two-lane highway, I slowly drank one beer. In the same time, he drank five beers. I told him I was headed to Sarasota to visit some

friends. We talked all day; somewhere near the east end of Florida's panhandle, he told me he was heading north into Georgia. He dropped me off in a small town and he gave me the key to a trucker's flophouse. He said I could spend the night. "Just leave the key in the room." The hotel was old, made of wood, and hadn't seen paint in years. The room was on the second floor, and it was filthy. I took a walk around the small town and saw an open-air laundry with two sets of washing machines. A wooden sign over one set of the washing machines read "Colored." The other set of washers had a sign that read "White." I thought, either the whites in northern Florida didn't want to wash their clothes with the Negroes, or the Negroes didn't want to wash their clothes with the whites.

I put a blanket on the floor and lay down for the night; the mattress looked a bit too gamey for me. The next morning I headed for the highway and Sarasota. After five or six rides, I made it to Palmetto, Florida. I called my friends, and soon they drove to the crossroads and picked me up.

I thought I was talking too much and slowing down my pinochle lesson, so I stopped. The good captain asked me to continue. I thought, *He's a Dartmouth man*. He probably had never hitchhiked, and he liked my story, so I continued.

After a few days in Sarasota, I said my goodbyes and headed to Fort Lauderdale. My first memorable ride was with a young couple in a 1956 Chevy. The car was the pride and joy of the driver. It was painted a deep red; the driver called it “candy apple red.” The Chevy had a hole cut through the hood and a large chrome air filter poked through. There were long chrome exhaust pipes running from just under the front wheel wells along the rocker panel to the rear wheel wells. The pipes had a piece of metal bolted to the end, blocking the flow of exhaust. The car was a two-door, and I was invited to sit in the backseat. The driver, a young man in his twenties, peeled off the gravel shoulder, screeching the tires as he shifted into second gear. When he shifted into third, he was speeding down the road at fifty or sixty miles an hour. He settled the speed at eighty miles an hour and passed every car in sight on this two-lane Florida blacktop.

His girlfriend turned and leaned toward me, then asked, “Where ya goin’?” I told her the same story I had been repeating day after day: draft notice, 120-day delay, and warm weather, blah blah blah.

The driver decided to pass a car that was also going eighty miles an hour. He moved into the oncoming lane of traffic pulled up next to the other car, glanced at the driver, and then floored it, taking the car close to a hundred miles an hour. I watched the red needle move

ever closer to the end of its arc. He leaned toward the backseat and said to me, "This car is fast, huh?"

"Yeah, it seems real fast to me," I said. I was on the edge of my seat, and I wanted him to slow down, but I dared not ask him for fear he would drive faster.

"See those canals on the side of the road?" He pointed to long drainage canals. "If this car ever blows a tire at this speed and we go into the canal, they'll never find us."

*Why would he say something like that?* "How are your tires?" I asked him.

"Shit, they're as bald as billiard balls."

"Oh," I said, "maybe you should slow down a little?"

"Naa, it's OK."

We came to a crossroad and he pulled into a service station. I thanked them and said I was going to call my friend to pick me up. I walked into a small diner and waited until they drove away, then I walked back to the highway and put my thumb out. There was another hitchhiker standing on the road. He gave me a stone-faced look. I walked back into the restaurant and waited until he found a ride.

I made it to Fort Lauderdale in one day and checked into a downtown hotel, twelve dollars a night, cash in advance. The weather was warm and breezy. I thought if I could find a job parking cars or working in a kitch-

en, I could afford to stay a few days. I hitched a ride to the beach. After making some inquiries at restaurants, I found no work and headed back to the hotel. An older man in a huge, white, two-door Cadillac convertible, top down, saw me and made an illegal U-turn. Tires screeching, he pulled over and, with a broad smile, said, “Need a ride?”

“Yes,” I said. “I’m going into town.”

“Get in. I’ll give you a lift.” I jumped in the car and told him my story—draft notice, no work, low on money, and probably leaving for Chicago in the morning. He told me he was a philanthropist down from Boston on holiday. He lived on his boat, which was berthed at a yacht club. He told me there was always work to be done—“Things to be fixed, things to be cleaned and painted.” As we pulled up to my hotel, he asked if I would be interested in a few days of work helping him on the boat. He would be leaving for Boston in a week and had to “put things in order.”

“Just a couple of days, but it would put a few dollars in your pocket. What do you say?”

He seemed harmless, so I said yes. It was decided that he would pick me up in the morning. I thought, *This is good, I need the money.* “Okay, see you in the morning,” I said.

The next day, I walked out of the hotel and noticed his car was parked a block away, and he was waving at me to walk over to him. *That's odd*, I thought, *maybe he doesn't want to be seen by the hotel staff*. Two of the staff were standing on the sidewalk smoking cigarettes. I walked down the block and got into his car, then we drove to his yacht. It was big and it was docked next to other boats off a wooden pier. He showed me around the deck, the bridge, and the other parts of a boat that I knew nothing about. We went below for coffee. He brewed it on a small stove in the galley. I asked him what he wanted me to paint? He hesitated then told me with a faint smile that he wanted me to be his ... "special friend."

"Special friend?" With a question in my voice, I repeated his words out loud, "Special friend?" I was trying to figure out what he meant by "special friend."

"Oh," I said. "So does that mean you don't want me to paint your boat?"

"That's right," he said, smiling.

*Ahhhhh, shit!* I thought. *You fucking idiot, Duffy. You should have known.* I jumped up and started for the small door near the galley, but he was blocking my way. I roared at him, "Let me out of here!" He could see the determination in my face, and he backed off.

Once off his boat, standing on the pier and boiling with anger, I realized that I was still miles from the highway.

He saw my dilemma and suggested that he could drive me to the outskirts of town where I could get a ride. It was awkward for me because I was still smarting from his deceit. I hesitated and then said, “Okay, just get me to the highway.”

I hugged the passenger door as he drove, and I didn’t say a word. He mentioned during the drive that he thought I was a bit naïve, and I should have known why he had invited me onto his boat. I thought, *Of course, it’s my fault because I didn’t decipher his cryptic bullshit job offer.* I didn’t answer him or look at him. He stopped the car at an intersection, and as I left his white Cadillac, he reached over to put some cash in my hand. I glanced at his hand, then at him. In a voice filled with anger, I said, “I don’t want your money.” Then I slammed the door and didn’t look back. He drove off.

The fact was I didn’t *want* his money, but I did *need* his money. And now I had very little of the green cash that I had just refused. I had refused it out of pride, out of my distaste for his lie. All I wanted was work and a little cash. If he had been honest with me the night before, I would have said, “No, thanks.” Then today I would be off to Chicago without feeling as if I had just been snookered.

I don't know if I was more pissed off at his lie or at myself for being so stupid in swallowing it. Now I was walking again on the highway with about ten dollars in my pocket. As I walked along the road, I thought of things I should have said to him, "Fuck you, you lying jag-off." Jag-off was a great Chicago slur.

I hitchhiked north to Jacksonville and spent the night in a blue-green fiberglass chair at the Trailways Bus Station. As I sat there trying to fall asleep, I went over the day's events again and again. I was furious with myself for being so gullible. I couldn't sleep.

The captain put his cards down; he was listening intently to my story. "What happened in Jacksonville?" he asked. "Keep going, what happened?" I went on with my story.

The next morning, I purchased a bus ticket to Mobile, Alabama, and I kept a few bucks in my pocket for food. I *wanted* to buy a ticket to New Orleans, but I didn't have the money. All day I rode the bus west, arriving in Mobile about 8:00 p.m. My goal now was to get to the New Orleans Illinois Central train station. I left the bus and soon was back on the highway with my thumb out. A light rain began to fall.

A guy in a gigantic car pulled up and stopped; it was a 1965 Chrysler Imperial. There was a large dent in the right-rear quarter panel. The driver wore a brown suit coat with narrow lapels, matching brown pants, and

a white shirt. To top it off, he had a skinny black tie and a brown snap-brimmed hat. The hat had a wide, black hatband, folded over on one side. He told me he was a traveling salesman heading home to LaPlace, Louisiana. He had spent a week out selling women's lingerie. He pointed to the boxes of his samples; they filled the long, bench-like rear seat and obstructed his back window. He was proud of his car. He told me it had a new feature—cruise control.

He looked at me then said, "You see, kid, I get it up to the speed I want, push this button, and ... let 'er ride." A smile crossed his face as he said, "Let 'er ride." Then he floored it.

I glanced over at his speedometer—it read somewhere between eighty and eighty-five miles an hour. As we flew along the highway, the light rain in Mobile turned to a heavy rain as we crossed Lake Pontchartrain. The salesman kept the Chrysler on cruise control, never slowing down. I looked over at him, watching his small hands on the wheel, his small frame in the large bench seat, and his shiny brown shoes that barely reached the pedals. I thought, *Is this guy driving the car or is the car driving him?* I was worried about the speed. There were no seat belts, and if there were seat belts, no one used them in 1966. At one point along the Lake Pontchartrain causeway, I could feel the car hydroplane, but the driver nev-

er slowed. He just kept talking and telling me dirty jokes. "Here's another one, kid."

He barked out his joke, then just before the punch line, he began laughing, throwing his head back and exposing his tobacco-stained teeth. He looked like an aging horse with huge, brown teeth that were pushed away from the gum line. His laugh turned into a phlegm-choked cough. At that point, he pulled a gray handkerchief from his pocket, then he emptied the contents from his mouth into it, folding it and then placing it back in his pocket. It was disgusting. He lit Pall Mall cigarettes one after another. He continuously offered me one each time he lit up. "No, thanks," I said. His jokes were boring, but I listened and laughed. It was the price I paid to arrive in New Orleans dry. I counted the mileposts. With the grace of God, we made it to New Orleans and the Illinois Central train station.

I spent the night on an oak bench. The next morning, I boarded the first train north to Chicago. It was an express train. The first stop was Memphis, Tennessee. Twenty minutes out of New Orleans, the conductor walked by and asked for my ticket. I handed him my railroad pass, the small card my father had given me in Chicago. He looked it over, up one side and down the other. Then he walked away and began consulting with the other conductor. He walked back to me, and with an indifferent voice, he told me the pass I

had didn't work on express trains. He told me that I would have to get off in Memphis and then board the local train to Chicago. I protested. I told him the pass worked on the express train coming down from Chicago, *The City of New Orleans*. "Well, they made a mistake. You are getting off in Memphis." He turned and walked away.

This seemed to me like some type of power trip. I looked around the car. It was half-empty. I should have played up the Vietnam card and my draft notice: "Sir, could you please see your way to let me ride on your train? I need to get back to Chicago before I'm sent Vietnam." I was too tired to think straight, so I left the train in Memphis and found another oak bench.

I waited five hours in Memphis for the local train. The local made every stop between Memphis and Chicago, every crossroad, every small town, and every grain elevator. It seemed like an eternity. I arrived in Chicago the next morning and took the 'L' train home. I slept for twelve hours straight.

The captain and I were called away from our card game. The Long Binh ammo dump was being mortared. We were just a few miles from the ammo dump, and we could see the mortar rounds flash as they hit the ground. One struck its mark, and the Long Binh ammo dump went up in a white ball of fire. The sky lit up with an enormous flash,

and soon the sound filled our ears. A deafening roar that elicited a collective, "Wow!"

Weeks went by at Bearcat. Each day, I would lead the empty trucks to the Long Binh ammo dump, which was quickly rebuilt after the mortar attack. Our trucks were filled with artillery shells, then we drove out to the batteries, unloaded, and headed back to Bearcat. One evening our captain informed me there were orders coming down from headquarters that would send me out into the field. He said it might be weeks before they were issued. He went on to advise me to purchase anything I might need from the PX, because there was no PX out in the field. The orders the captain mentioned would send me out to the bush as the Fire Direction Control (FDC) officer of Battery C. My boss would be Lieutenant Jack Smith, the same man who had greeted me when I arrived at Bearcat; he was now in the bush.

Lieutenant Jack Smith had been a sergeant in the army stationed at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. He told me he was encouraged by his battalion commander to apply to Officer Candidate School. Jack passed the exam and entered OCS at Fort Sill for the six months of excruciating physical and academic training. He was my senior by ten or twelve years. He maintained an imposing dignity that only age and experience can produce. He was sent out to Battery C as its Fire Direction Control officer a few months before I was. This position required extreme care; I will explain.

Each day, twenty-five to fifty times, the FDC officer was radioed a set of map coordinates. Those coordinates, a series of numbers, were used to pinpoint a target on a map. After the position on the map was found, a small pin was inserted into a chart. Then a long metal ruler was rotated to the pin. That accomplished, we could read the distance in meters from our gun position to the target. A metal arc fixed to

this ruler gave us the deflection, the position of the gun tube left or right of dead center. Using slide rules, we figured the elevation and powder charge for the 105-millimeter artillery pieces in our battery. Each artillery round had seven powder charges these charges blasted the high explosive shell from the cannon. The powder charges were packaged in small cotton bags and the seven bags were tied onto a long string; if the fire mission called for a charge one, six powder bags were cut from the string and a single bag was left in the brass canister. A charge one would fire the shell out about 2,500 to 3,500 meters. A charge seven sent the shell out almost seven miles. So there were many points from the initial coordinate numbers to the actual firing of the weapon where a mistake might occur. A mistake with artillery could be deadly. A short or a long round could hit and kill your own troops, or civilians. That was referred to as friendly fire, or in our camp as a fuck up. Errors from artillery shells, bombs from airplanes, or small arms fire from the infantry were not uncommon. Our job in the FDC bunker was to make sure there were no mistakes, and no friendly fire casualties.

Jack was a careful man. If there was the slightest doubt about the location of a target, he would call the infantry to confirm the coordinates. Then he double-checked the target locations on our maps, along with each calculation of elevation and deflection. Now for the second time in my Vietnam tour, I would work under Jack Smith. He would train me to be as careful and diligent as he was. Jack did his job well.