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Introduction

DURING THE FALL OF NINETEEN Seventy, I entered the senior year of high school full of hope and optimism for the future. On November Fourth, a letter arrived from President Richard Nixon wishing warm birthday regards and, oh by the way, casually revealing I had been drafted. Of course, it went on to state they would wait until graduation to collect another warm body destined for the battlefields of Vietnam.

As a result of testing high on the Morse portion of the classification tests, two Army Security Agency recruiters pulled me aside to discuss joining the secret organization as a Morse operator separate from the regular Army. The O5h-20 MOS had the highest washout rates at the time; those who passed were considered gifted.

Upon graduation from MOS school, my class was shown a slide presentation of our first duty station; a rustic jungle base in Thailand. However, while on vacation before reporting, I received travel orders in the mail for the 175th Radio Research Field Station overlooking Bien Hoa Airbase Vietnam.

Welcome To Sunny Vietnam

WHETHER IT BE HOT LEAD flying in the jungles of Vietnam or the coldness of Russian aggression, Morse code was the thread connecting every outrageous adventure.

On an overcast mid-July morning in nineteen seventy-two, I boarded a Flying Tigers airplane out of Oakland bound for Tan Son Nhut Airbase Saigon. A hundred or so first-timers sat all around wondering what it would be like to be in Vietnam. After overhearing their conversations, I was grateful to be in the secretive Army Security Agency as a Morse Intercept Operator. Rather than hump through the jungle with an M-16 on full auto, I would spend the year wielding a manual typewriter in a menacing manner.

Having no other distractions to supplant the boredom, my mind drifted through the highs and lows of passing a mandatory Eighteen Groups Per Minute (five Morse characters per group).

Training began with the class sounding off 'dit dah Alpha' then the entire alphabet until they became familiar. Afterwards, we sat in front of an electronic typewriter listening through headphones as random Morse characters were sent at a super slow speed of One GPM. Once I consistently typed the right letters, the speed increased with the addition of five more characters at each level. Just progressing through the groups drove me to sick call many times with crippling migraines and debilitating stomach cramps.

One torturous hour stacked on top of another until a commanding voice mercifully announced we were an hour out from Tan Son Nhut Airbase. As if on cue, every conversation in the plane immediately ceased or lowered to a whisper as the reality of going to war set in. It was so quiet I swear you could hear a grenade pin drop.

After the plane landed with nary a bump, curiosity seekers of all backgrounds filled the windows during a short taxi to an open area of the runway. On any other flight the overhead lights would send people scrambling to get their shit and get off. Not on this day. I never saw so many polite soldiers in one confined space tripping over themselves to let you go first. It was downright heartwarming.

An attractive stewardess could not conceal the underlying expression of concern during the utterance of a strained goodbye. That first step onto the rollaway ramp was greeted by a blast of blistering air certain to broil me in under five minutes. Every instinct screamed to run back inside but the very act would brand me a coward. Better to suck it buttercup and stand in a half-ass formation on the hot tarmac in front of three ugly green buses. From the well of the first in line, an impatient pimple-faced Private First Class barked out orders to stop looking ridiculous and climb on board.

Riding to Camp Alpha inside a sweltering bus with fifty other new meat produced a noxious cloud of body odor and bad breath. At first blush, the intimidating complex we entered had more in common with a penitentiary than a processing center. It was manned by armed military police who guarded the only way in and out and was surrounded by ten-foot-tall fencing with razor-wire strung across the top.

I was mentally prepared for the military purgatory of spending long boring days buried under tons of red-tape or put to sleep by a droning lecture. After exploring further, my outlook improved dramatically. Nothing could surpass a theater showing free movies and a Post Exchange selling sundry items at cheap prices. Unless it was the nightclub featuring live bands and go-go girls or the maids assigned to wash our clothes and make the beds.

As for air conditioning? The best one could hope for was a current of hot air whipping through the mesh screening subbing for windows in the two-story wooden buildings passing for barracks. Having every building wrapped in a protective cocoon of green sandbags was a constant reminder of where we were and how fleeting life can be.

Within my barracks were two diddy bopping operators who already had cool nicknames for Vietnam. In no time, I become fast friends with Woody and Jed the Head. Just by gazing at the lanky body then up, I hoped Woody was not as kinky as the headful of brown hair and bushy mustache suggested. Luckily, the pair of silver-rimmed square glasses gave off an overriding dork vibe.

Then there was Jed the Head who constantly bore the expression of a baby about to crap its diaper. His remarkably unremarkable features of shortcut sandy brown hair and round brown glasses on an average face did little to inspire the ladies. In a world of squared away soldiers, he was a stick figure trying to fill out a baggy uniform.

As for my nickname? The young mama san assigned to our barracks tried to say Rick but it always came out Lick thanks to a linguistics hiccup. The letter 'r' was among others the Vietnamese had trouble pronouncing. When she said, 'Lick Lotters', in a sweet singsong voice, I would crack up every time. Unfortunately, a looming Woody was nearby when the petite mama san wearing white pajamas happened to say it. I tried to plead for her innocence but he blew me off by mockingly repeating it several times.

Hands down the most oppressive downside so far had to be the unrelenting sun beating down from a clear blue sky. When someone mentioned it being a hundred ten in the shade, I had no reason to doubt their word nor the strength to find out. To counteract the brutal onslaught, our bodies perspired profusely from the armpit of the green uniforms down to the waistband. It was not a pretty sight to see or be seen in.

The only refuge at our disposal lay in the PX, a small movie theater and the indoctrination buildings. Whenever it became unbearable, I would regroup in the

coolness of a movie theater showing the same film all day long. Or congregate in the sprawling nightclub. Escaping the blinding brightness for a dark oasis of spinning ceiling fans was not the biggest shock to the eyes. That came later in the evening.

Assisted by the stirring of air and a cold can of beer pressed against a hot cheek, I sat at a crowded table battling both boredom and the weather. The uncertainty of what lay ahead prompted many spontaneous friendships to blossom over shots of whiskey chased down by gulps of Budweiser. It certainly primed us for the Vietnamese band setting up on a sizable stage located in one corner. An overflow house clapped and cheered as they began playing 'We Gotta Get Out of This Place' by The Animals. Hearing the Vietnam anthem sung in a Vietnamese accent was unsettling to be sure. Especially when many considered it to be sacred.

The group knew many of the current songs on the American Top Forty but playing them properly required real talent. It did not matter to the majority of rabid fans gawking at the young go-go dancers. Even though these exotic creatures were prettier than our mama sans, none were any better at filling out the top portion of the skimpy outfits. From every indication, they learned to dance by watching American porn flicks. A rhythmic swaying of the girls' hips constantly progressed into dry-humping the air to simulate doing each and every one of us.

As part of the incoming processing, we were required to attend indoctrination classes to get the lowdown on Vietnam. Most were boring as hell dealing with the usual propaganda of being ambassadors of the United States and how we should conduct ourselves accordingly.

Every ear in the room perked up when the subject of prostitutes was raised. The instructor lost all credibility by suggesting we stay away from women altogether. With a straight face he wove a tale of deception concerning every indigenous female. According to him they were Viet Cong who wished to maim us by depositing a razor blade deep inside themselves. He went on to gross everyone out by describing in explicit detail how your manhood was sliced and diced during a spirited session of lovemaking.

Before we recovered from that frightful speech, the Sergeant doubled down on the crazy. An audible gasp arose when he described what happens when you contract the incurable Black Syphilis. Beside flesh falling from the bones, there was a leper colony on a deserted island in the Pacific waiting in your future. A last note of caution concerned heroin. Rather than discuss this in any detail, we were handed a cheesy comic book entitled 'Skag' and told to read it carefully. Or use it as shit paper in the outdoor latrine.



A FITTING CONCLUSION TO THE stay at Camp Alpha was conveyed by a strong-armed MP shaking me awake in the darkened barracks. In keeping with the Army's bizzarro concept of 'hurry up and wait', the ASA soldiers were told to pack, hit the mess hall and be ready to depart at oh six hundred. Though excited to leave the isolation, a nagging voice in the dark recesses questioned if I was up for this adventure.

Golden rays of an awakening sun peeked over the movie theater as I lugged the heavy green duffel bag to the departure area. With arms folded together, Woody and Jed the Head were already standing around shooting the shit in front of an OD green bus. Being surrounded by a décor of such tasteless palette might be practical in the jungle but could it hurt to add a splash of color?

Any attempt at small talk was cut short by an agitated PFC screaming from the first step, "Alright you clueless nugs... it's time to board the bus to hell. Before embarkation put your duffel bags on the deuce-and-a-half parked behind me." It was no easy feat to lift the long bulky bags and toss them in the spacious bed of a large Army truck covered in green canvas. Somehow I lucked out by scarfing up a window seat directly behind the driver. Besides having more room to stretch out, the view through the windshield had to be better than the back of someone's head.

As it filled with forty wide-eyed new meat, our impatient chauffeur responded to every question with an emphatic, "Dream on nugs. You'll know soon enough."

Once the checklist was confirmed by an MP, the bus drove past the checkpoint and turned left onto a black-topped road. Not long after we traded the bosom and safety of the sprawling Tan Son Nhut Airbase for the backstreets of a deserted Saigon. A short interval later the bus motored north on the modern two-lane road of Highway One.

The earlier carefree conversations flying about gradually dwindled amid an atmosphere of apprehension for the unknown awaiting one and all. As the constant rhythm of spinning tires marked the miles, it's hypnotic serenade was putting everyone to sleep. To escape such a fate I pretended to be a dog who reveled in the drop in temperature as the wind whipped by. During the futile effort to dodge bugs, I happened to notice an unusual object alongside the road up ahead.

Although we were still a football field away, the curious oddity bore the shape of two distinct forms: one very large and another smaller figure directly behind. As we rolled within one hundred feet, it all came into disgustingly sharp focus. In a flash, I jumped up waving both arms frantically overhead while imploring the sleepy masses to look out the windows on my side.

There in a field just off the road a small Vietnamese man was standing on some kind of tree stump directly behind a water buffalo. As both hands gripped the animal's rump, his frantic thrusting needed no explanation to those familiar with the generic term of 'stumping'. That feisty farmer struck me as a multi-tasker who could pound that poor beast into submission while taking the time to wave at us. It was just another example of the rich history of horny farmers taking liberties with their cross-eyed livestock.

The atmosphere inside the bus magically transformed from stoic to chaotic in a pulsating heartbeat. It was in jeopardy of tipping over when everyone clamored to one side to view the weirdly absurd. By then, the heavy tension gripping those headed into the unknown was usurped by lighthearted banter.

The 175th

THOUGH THE SUN HAD BEEN up for hours, I still sat slumped over on an ancient steel bunk feeling dazed and hazed. Upon arrival at the 175th Radio Research Field Station, no one would allow us breathe let alone unpack.

Shortly after passing the shameless farmer, the bus turned off the highway and drove uphill on a narrow asphalt road. At the very crest, I could see the sprawling Bien Hoa Airbase running lengthwise along a wide valley. Off to the right a massive tarmac was bursting with all manner of airplanes lined up in diagonal rows. While on the left lay a small town nestled around blocks of warehouses.

After turning onto a red-clay dirt road, we eventually drove up to a fenced-in compound guarded by an MP sitting inside a small wooden shack covered in green sandbags. Without bothering to look up, the corporal made a half-ass gesture waving the bus through with a left hand. Every window grew a head craning to get a first look at our new home. Instead of a friendly greeting, the soldiers we drove past either looked up shaking their heads in disgust or suggested we fuck off.

The bus lurched to a stop in front of a sandbagged building with a white HQ sign hanging above the door and another out front confirming this to be the 175th. In a sharp piercing demonstration of pure lung power, the PFC commanded everyone to get the hell off his bus. Such eloquence and display of compassion brought back fond memories of the DI's in Basic Training. Before driving off in a

red cloud of dust, he cleared up one burning question. A nug was a new guy and we were the sorriest bunch he ever ferried in-county.

As the platoon of clueless nugs stood in a ragged formation, a youthful Lieutenant exited HQ. In lieu of the usual welcoming speech, he ordered everyone to secure their duffel bag from a pile haphazardly tossed on the ground. Audible grunts and groans offered a clue to some of the men's conditioning as the column of twos humped it up a slight incline and over to a series of one-story hooches.

Though considerably smaller, these wooden barracks with sheet metal roofs were nothing more than a mini-reproduction of the ones at Camp Alpha. From the mesh screening wrapping around the building to the ever-present protective sandbags stacked halfway up. The LT ignored all questions while assigning us two to a room in the ten room living quarters. All he wanted to hear was 'yes sir' when your name was called out.

The rest of the morning was an exercise in patience dealing with the usual mounds of paperwork. Following a tasteless lunch in an antiquated mess hall, the braying cattle were herded into HQ for a half day of indoctrination. It had nothing to do with women and everything to do with the basics of daily life. A disinterested Sergeant went through the motions highlighting where the latrine, operations and nightclub could be found. When he mentioned our cover story, it was too incredible to believe. How could anyone look at me and see a brainiac scientist studying atmospheric conditions, solar flares and the such?

Just when everyone was nice and relaxed, Sarge concluded the session by mentioning we all had guard duty at eighteen hundred hours. Now, wasn't that a swift kick to the nether regions! The last time anyone touched a weapon was a year ago in Basic. Even then, we were only taught the fundamentals and had forgotten much of it by now.

Shortly before dark, an assembly of uneasy soldiers massed at the armory behind HQ with gasmasks in hand. As a series of names were read off a clipboard, each person stepped forward to be issued a fully loaded M-16 rifle. Whether by design or a random act, some were assigned an M-79 Grenade Launcher as well.

When the PFC ticked off the last name, he told those with weapons to follow closely behind to the front of HQ.

Throughout the short wait for transportation, I hung back from the group of curious soldiers who thought it wise to chamber a round. When one smartass flicked the safety off, my priorities shifted from silent observer to vocal critic. Yeah, we were armed and dangerous to everyone but the enemy.

Right after a deuce-and-a-half truck screeched to a halt, we began boarding two at a time. I let the other eager beavers line two benches running along either side of the cramped interior before claiming the last spot on the right. Woody sat on the opposite side, propped the M-16 between his legs and began fiddling with the sight at the end of the barrel.

After taking off with a lurch, the canvas covered incubator headed toward the outer perimeter of the compound. Along the way, a thick black cloud reeking of diesel fuel spewed from an exhaust pipe just behind the cab. As it swept through, the odious apparition acted in league with a suffocating heat to make every breath a laborious affair. Eventually, the truck began running parallel to a towering berm line of red dirt the Army engineers constructed many years ago. Within these fortifications a series of green sandbagged bunkers were set at hundred foot intervals.

Without any advance notice, the truck slid to a stop in front of the first in line to drop off a trio of chumps playing soldier. Unfortunately, as the PFC called out the names, mine happened to be one. It was a relief though to have Woody and the new roomie Owl also sharing the same heavy burden. I gave him the nickname after seeing those two huge eyes constantly scanning left to right and back again beneath a feathery hairline of brown. Given Owl's height and girth, 'Lurch' would have carried more weight but one of the old-timers already claimed it.

We took turns jumping from the rear with weapons slung over the shoulder before tramping across a brief stretch of high grass to the bottom half of the bunker. While I carefully climbed inside a square sandbagged entrance, they scrambled up a wicked incline to check out the view from topside.

At first glance the cramped quarters lined with sandbags gave every indication of being from WWII; my opinion was influenced by two decrepit Army cots barely standing in one corner. An overpowering stench of rotting canvas infused with the musky scent of mold hung heavy in the air. It must have smelled like fresh-cut roses to the many creepy crawlies making themselves at home.

After leaning the rifle next to an M-60 heavy machine gun, I inspected the extensive barrel sticking through a square opening at the jungle ahead. Not only was there an ammo belt threaded into the chamber, there were additional metal boxes stacked to the right for that occasional firefight. Something I hoped to avoid.

Rather than contemplate such frightening scenarios, I fled the hotbox for the coolness of a hundred-degree breeze on a sweaty brow. Both hands and feet worked in unison to power up the steep copper-colored hill to where the two sat at the edge of the flat sandbagged roof.

While staring at an open clearing and the jungle beyond, a troubled Woody wondered aloud, "Like, they must be tripping to think that concertina wire will protect us from an all-out attack. I don't want to freak the two of you out, but how do we set off the claymore mines? Fer shure this is a gnarly setup." The continuous eight-foot-tall roll of razor-wire he referenced stretched the entire length of the berm line within a short distance in front of the bunkers. In between the two a series of claymore mines were rigged to detonate outward at any advancing Viet Cong. Even if we found the triggers, there was still the mystery of operating them properly.

To pass the time we told tall tales of back home, surveyed the desolate stretch of 'no man's land' and then the South Vietnamese soldiers in fortified positions. Behind us??? Technically the US was there to support them in the bloody quest for freedom. A very noble cause indeed. So, why were the ARVN troops not manning the bunkers with us in the cushy support role? It was one of many burning questions I would ponder during the dead of night.

Though the relentless sun was viewed as an enemy, the fickle soldiers on guard duty welcomed the spotlight it shined on the jungle. Especially after some of

the stories going around. One talkative Spec5 compared the VC to cockroaches who only came out after dark. He described in gory detail what happens when a sapper silently crawls through the long grass to slice your throat open.

At that tenuous moment, there were three bothersome obstacles to overcome. The anxious dead time before nightfall, dive-bombing mosquitoes, and making it through the night without shitting ourselves. During the lengthening shadows of dusk, a fourth came calling. On the road behind us a stripped-down jeep roared out of nowhere carrying four or five NVA regulars in blacked-out faces. As they drove past the bunker, we stood slack-jawed on top taking it in with bugged-eyed expressions of horror. All hell broke loose in a hail of gunfire accompanied by the popping of tear-gas canisters filling the air. Their piercing cries of, "Die Yankee. Go home you dog", were interwoven within other taunts in Vietnamese.

When billowing white clouds began to envelope the three of us within a toxic embrace, a mad scramble ensued to secure gasmasks which were so casually tossed aside. During the chaos of bumping into one another, we did a better than average impersonation of the Three Stooges. In between choking fits, I somehow managed to slide the mask on and tighten the straps on each side. The instant relief for a pair of watery eyes and a raw throat was not forthcoming but at least it stopped any further irritation.

A sudden burst of automatic gunfire coming from one of the other bunkers sent a chilling shockwave running down my spine; it ushered in a test every soldier must face. That split second decision of fight or flight.

Rather than head for the hills, I was more interested in scrambling down the mound to secure an M16 still leaning against the bunk. Finding it was only half the battle of fumbling for the safety with trembling fingers and flicking it over to full automatic. Eventually, when the three of us stood ready to return fire, dissipating white clouds unmasked the illusion of being under attack. Nearly every bunker down the line was suffering from the same signs yet none of them returned fire. Why?

On a return trip back to the compound, the so-called sappers took immense pleasure in pointing out Larry, Curly and Moe. The hysterical laughter was mere decibels beneath their recent gunfire. As the jeep faded into the deepening shadows, the field phone inside the bunker began jingling incessantly. It happened to be a Lieutenant in the Command bunker behind the berm line with a newsflash we could have used five minutes ago. Some of the old-timers would be demonstrating live fire so do not panic and definitely do not fire back.

If this was any indication of our readiness, the VC had nothing to worry about. Not even fifteen minutes later, an Army truck began rumbling down the road in our direction. With vengeance in mind, three pissed dudes trained their M-16s' on the driver and waited for the slightest excuse. Regrettably, it was from the mess hall delivering a tasty treat of stale ham sandwiches and warm cans of coke.

In hindsight, shooting first would have been the proper response.

As the world faded to black, so did our morale manning the inner bunker with a host of chirping critters. It was impossible to shake a premonition of being buried alive as I stared out through the square hole at the jungle ahead. Unable to sleep, we three brave soldiers spent the entire night jumping at the slightest of sounds. Just when it appeared morning would never come, Mother Nature began an erotic striptease of sorts. She disrobed one shade of black at a time before unveiling a glorious sunrise of yellow and orange. To say it was the most beautiful sight in the world would have been a massive understatement.



THE RIFF OF AN ELECTRIC guitar flowing from the nightclub accompanied Owls' huge foot slamming against the bunk. After sleeping all day, this was his way of inviting me to join Woody and the others at the nightclub. Somehow, I managed to snooze through the constant ebb and flow of an active military camp. That will happen once the constant drip of adrenaline is suddenly shut off.

Per the décor of a wartime Army, green sandbags covered most of the one-story building in a protective cocoon. As the door opened onto a world of

testosterone-charged partying, a Vietnamese band was on a small stage butchering one of my favorite songs: 'Won't Get Fooled Again' by the Who. The redeeming grace was definitely two exotic creatures grinding in rhythm to the off-key somewhat out of sync harmony.

I spotted Owl's head rising above the packed house back where an impressive bar stretched the entire length. Employing a swimming technique where both elbows acted as flippers, I navigated a roomful of animated partyers to join him. When the lip of an ice-cold Budweiser was just inches from two parched lips, someone standing alongside ripped it away. Before I could even move, the contents were poured inside the cutoff blue jean shorts. A secondary waterfall of beer flowed into my eyes as someone from behind sarcastically declared, "Fuckin Nug."

Up until then there was no reason to overreact. That occurred when an out-of-focus mob descended from every angle. A multitude of rugged hands hoisted my body high above the fray to begin a journey toward the stage. The feeling of helplessness, lying spread-eagle as a blindfold was applied, demanded some measure of resistance. Even if it was a futile attempt to break free from these drunken lunatics.

As we drew closer to the pulsating amplifiers, my body was lowered just enough to be sprayed from head-to-toe with, hopefully, beer. Who knew what these soldiers were capable of? Did they not just try to kill us?

The band stopped playing mid-song as I was roughly deposited on stage but still restrained by both biceps. It progressed from weird to downright perverted when two smaller sets of hands began unzipping the shorts and pulling a short-sleeved green t-shirt off. An overpowering scent of cheap perfume lent an erotic undercurrent to being stripped naked in public. Once the shorts were removed, I cried out in mock horror for all to hear, "I'm not that kind of soldier."

Under threat of death, I was released from captivity but warned not to move until the music began anew. A soulful guitar riff reinforced by the suggestive beat of a snare drum complemented the blindfolds' removal by a cute girl who

motioned to dance with her. While standing in boxers surveying a pack of howling wolves, the only avenue forward was to get freaky by doing a dry-humping horny-dog-on-the-leg thing. She was startled at first when I hugged the upper thigh to slide along a silky-smooth pole. Then the emergence of an easy laugh, followed by another, assured me a slap was not forthcoming.

Instead of running off stage from embarrassment, I willingly performed the ritual on the other dancer as the crowd roared its approval. Afterwards, I slipped on the clothes before stepping into a throng of drunken soldiers who displayed their appreciation by slapping my back unmercifully.



THE VERY NEXT MORNING I joined Jed and the others on a stroll across an asphalt road to begin new careers as Morse interceptors.

During orientation, many in attendance felt some degree of anxiety when the crusty Sergeant described our precarious perch high above Bien Hoa Airbase. Especially when told we would be defending the compound from any enemy aggression. There was some reference to the Fifth Cavalry who occupied the compound next door but, unless they happened to be in from the jungle, we were on our own. The culprit craving the high ground was actually a variety of antennas requiring unimpeded airwaves to pick up encrypted enemy messages.

As Owl and Woody approached the building constructed from heavy sheet metal, I reflected back on four months of pure hell to be reborn a mill monkey: one of the nicknames for O5hs'. Passing MOS school only ensured an opportunity to join the fraternity but performing well in the field was required to stay at this level. A blast of frigid air welcomed the four of us to nirvana at sixty degrees. If duty alone was not enough, reveling in this winter wonderland was a compelling incentive to show up for work.

Inside a sizable classroom with three rows of eight desks each, a chaotic gathering of incoming versus outgoing operators milled about noisily exchanging information. Attached to the wall at the front hung a large white board with

groupings of four random numbers and letters written in black magic marker. While waiting to be recognized, we stood around looking like the lost nuggets we were.

Once the other shift filed out, a Sergeant sporting the brightest of red hair introduced himself as the Trick Chief in charge. Each one was assigned a permanent position to man for the duration or until death do us part. I sat down at an oversized wooden desk surveying the tools of the trade. A well-used manual typewriter, commonly referred to as a mill, was seated dead center on top. To its left lay a dog-eared logbook containing all pertinent activity during the shift and to the right an R-390 radio receiver with a headset resting on top.

This specialized receiver, containing many of the same features as a ham radio, was housed inside a small metal rack securely affixed to the desk. On the face, an array of small switches encircled a rectangular readout displaying the current frequency. With just one spin of the black knob residing below, those numbers rose or tumbled accordingly. When it came to finetuning a weak signal, some of the seasoned operators could play the rf switches with the skill of a piano prodigy.

For the rest of the day each position was assigned a starting and stopping frequency to constantly roam between searching for VC chatter. And a cheat sheet of priority callsigns the Trick Chief wanted found. By copying and documenting traffic, the specific callsign representing a particular military unit could usually be obtained. They were always a combination of four numbers and letters in any random order.

When I rolled up on an operator sending 'K7EB de (this is) Q4J6' several times over, the exhilaration of finding someone to copy was tempered by a fuzzy recollection of the Q signals they used. Also, a lack of intimacy with the keys led to several typing hiccups as the VC operator tried to make contact.

Above the continuous crackle of static electricity, the other unit responded by sending 'Q4J6 de K7EB' in a strong clear signal. When Q4J6 asked QRU (do you have anything), its counterpart responded in the negatory before signing off. This

brief check-in spared me the agony of trying to keep up with a message and possibly embarrassing myself.

Afterwards, I ripped the sheet of continuous white paper from the mill and deposited it in an 'out' basket sitting at the front desk. From there they were dispatched to the building next door to be deciphered by cryptanalysis and linguist. The level of frustration those eggheads endured depended solely on how accurately we copied the messages in blocks of five characters each. Trying to break a cipher when half the message was wrong had to be the intelligence equivalent of a needle in the haystack.

I was genuinely pleased to see the relief shift drift in but there was no denying 'Charlie' was going to be trouble. Our cherries were sacrificed desperately trying to copy sloppy operators sending Morse with coke cans and a live wire. All the newbies were accustomed to canned code (very clean and crisp) in school. These cats were another breed of feline altogether. During those frustrating moments trying to distinguish a dit from a dah, I was reminded of the Peanut's character whose voice was a trumpet. Even 'wah... wah wah wah... wah wah' would have been easier to copy.

Of all the knowledge I acquired in the eight-hour shift, the most important revolved around the sun. The TC threatened to smack anyone in the back of the head caught wearing the round black earpieces, known as cans, directly over your ears. He painted a gnarly picture of blood dripping out of the ear of a blown eardrum thanks to solar flares erupting from the sun's surface. At the end of a long tense week, we received two days off to recuperate and recharge a drained battery in whatever form that required: within the confines of the compound.



THE SMALL ROOM I SHARED with Owl was little more than four walls and some basic rickety furniture. Our cots, which were angled kitty-corner to each other, were held together by a steel frame supporting a rickety patchwork of

sagging springs. With the inclusion of two oversized metal armoires, there was barely room for guests to visit.

While slaving over a hot mill all day, I was ignorant to one of the perks of the 175th. After a night of partying at the club, I lay dead to the world resurrecting recently deceased brain cells as the camp came alive. A powerful sensation of being pleased was reinforced by an explicit technicolor dream of writhing naked bodies grinding against each other.

To someone who was still a virgin, this was as close as it came to achieving true enlightenment.

From the deep dark void of unconsciousness, I awoke to the rudeness of a bright new day and a strange woman's inviting smile. She thought nothing of wearing nothing under a thin Army blanket jerking about from the tussle occurring beneath. Just before the little soldier was set to fire off a volley, I yanked her hand away and jumped out of bed with the boxers flying at half-mast. As I looked down at a Vietnamese woman in her mid-twenties and then at Mr. Happy being happy, confusion set in. A burning desire to dive in with the petite bundle of cuteness flamed-out once the horror stories of razor blades and black syph came to mind.

In what smacked of insincerity, this brazen vixen offered a brief smile before declaring in a sultry manner, "Hey Joe. I numba one girl. I love you long time. Only five dolla." To turn down sex for the ridiculously low low price of five dollars was unamerican and unnatural.

Well, unnatural for sure.

Once this young lady of the morning realized 'no' actually meant no, one insult after another was hurtled in English, Vietnamese and a combination of the two. Though dancing the horizontal Charleston was a no-go, there was no reason to look away while she slipped on a tight red dress. One last zinger trailed behind as the indignant hooker left the room, "You numba ten GI... you cheap Charlie."

I was all for room service but not if it meant sacrificing the little guy in the process. Call me cautious or crazy since both applied!



IF YOU SURVEYED A HUNDRED people, a high percentage would demand privacy during those intimate moments soaping up and toweling down afterwards. Up until now, every shower was taken long after sundown when the cool water washed away a body covered in dried sweat.

After the rude awakening, a pounding head and queasy stomach would not permit a return to the consoling darkness of oblivion. To relieve the burning of a skull on fire, I walked over to the latrine with only a green towel to keep prying eyes at bay. My initial reaction to finding a gathering of mama sans squatting on the cement floor was to turn and leave. The problem was not in navigating these chatty ladies scrubbing soiled uniforms with stiff brushes and soapy water. It was the unimpeded view they were afforded of the communal shower dead ahead.

While I stood in front debating the pros and cons, their lively banter diminished to whispering in anticipation of the curtain dropping on Act I. Rather than dwell on it, I yanked the towel off and walked in with the attitude of someone on a Sunday stroll. A fair amount of tee-heeing amid the animated conversations was the first clue this was a meat market and I was being judged. Even more so when a couple of mama sans used 'ti ti' to describe me. Hearing the Vietnamese phrase for small was not what you want to hear when turning on the cold water.

One Month In Country

SOMETHING UNSETTLING WAS OCCURRING ON a regular basis. In a very short span, at least ten older operators caught the Freedom Bird home or to another duty station. Many of the cryptographers and other support personnel were also leaving without replacements coming in. To compensate for the deficit, HQ began scheduling extra shifts at operations plus an accelerated guard duty roster. The biggest loser to the drain of experienced operators had to be the grunts in the field desperate for any actionable intelligence.

A matter Woody hoped to remedy on one particular morning.

By now, the nugs were accustomed to coming in early to be briefed by the outgoing operator before taking over. These informal gabfest were a lighthearted affair exchanging range of frequencies and callsigns in between the latest jokes. Number one on the hit parade for this day was the callsign QV1X. Our lovable Trick Chief made a point of stressing it belonged to Command Headquarters of a North Vietnamese Army detachment active in the immediate area. He emphasized our very lives might depend upon finding it.

Just imagining a hellish night of firefights and incoming rounds raining down was enough motivation to keep an ear straining for the slightest of dits. An uneventful morning threatened to extend past lunch without one sighting of the elusive prey. Into the somber setting of clacking typewriter keys and hushed tones, Woody startled everyone by screaming out. Even the linguist in the other building heard him say, “QV1X is trying to establish contact with another unit.”

An excitable TC rushed over to plug a set of headphones into a secondary outlet on the receiver. There was really no need to listen in: the signal was so strong I could hear it sitting next door. His toothy grin welcomed the sweet metallic clicks of Command HQ sending:

K72S de QV1X

K72S de QV1X

From the depths of underlying static, an outpost responded in an equally powerful voice.

QV1X de K72S QRU?

After acknowledging Command, the operator had sent the international Q signal asking if they had any traffic to send. It also had a dual meaning of 'I have nothing'. No matter what language, the value for the Q signals never changed. It was a simple yet effective tool to communicate in the shortest time possible.

While this bit of drama played out, Sarge returned to the front and picked up the only red phone on the long wooden tabletop adrift in stacks of paperwork.

Command bypassed the usual formalities by asking if they were ready to receive a message.

K72S QRV?

Outpost replied in the affirmative.

QRV

In a hypnotic rising then sinking rhythm, the operator for HQ began sending a long-winded encrypted message with a deft hand. Once the whispers of his capture spread around the room, some of those with idle hands began gathering in the wings to watch a display of dexterity. Woody copied every aspect of this important message with due diligence and flying elbows. Then, in the middle of a keystroke, he froze midair as both ears were subjected to a sharp ear-splitting squelch followed by dead airspace. When neither came back on, he immediately sang out to let the TC know.

The verbal tongue-lashing Woody braced for was delivered with flowery sentiments reserved for conquering heroes. "I'm damn proud of you son for a job

well done! It was imperative we learned their exact location.” Sarge stroked an ego one second and slapped back the curious spectators the next by calling us ‘interceptless’ operators. And demanding we go back to work. While scanning through the snap, crackle, and pop of heavy electrostatic, the floor beneath my feet suddenly began shaking.

The continuous quaking shook up the entire room plus nervous operators who wondered whether to get under the desk or on top. To quell the uncertainty, our fearless leader stood up front waving his right arm high overhead to get everyone’s attention. “Listen up... this is for you newbies. The headquarters and outpost Woody was copying have been destroyed. The trembling you felt was from bomb strikes landing directly on their locations. Also, be very aware. Because you could feel the aftershock, it meant the enemy was less than ten miles away.”

TC paused briefly for effect before adding, “The phone call I made was to ARDF; an airplane rigged for aerial directional-finding. Using specialized equipment, they backtracked the two signals to their source. While this was happening, a call went out to roust the B-52 heavy bombers. Just for your information we call this arc light bombing.”

Death by Morse code. Who knew?



POT WAS EVERYWHERE BUT I resisted the temptation to partake so far. The pungent fragrance flowed from the mesh screening of numerous barracks during a nightly stroll around campus. An undercurrent of incense did little to mask it from discerning noses.

Woody, Jed the Head, and even Owl all started toking the evil weed with some of the old-timers. I could hear them in the next hooch laughing hysterically and all talking at once to be heard above the other. The level of stupidity they obtained was on par with a Zen master achieving total bliss. On most nights, Owl returned with glassy eyes and a goofy grin plastered across that lopsided face. Though he continually pleaded with me to take just one hit, I was a rock.

When a guillotine blade is hanging by a thread just over your head, don't do the executioner a favor by setting it in motion. We were warned at orientation what happens to those who are busted: the Army Security Agency releases them back to the regular Army to be reassigned in country. Then they pour salt in the wound by reinstating the one year drop from their original four-year enlistment. Woody boldly declared the ASA only busted heroin addicts but it could not sway a closed mind.



ONE OF THE OTHER SUBJECTS discussed during orientation involved the frequent rocket attacks on Bien Hoa Airbase. Even though the 175th was not the objective, our compound stood between VC in the jungle and their intended targets sitting on the tarmac below.

A youthful Second Lieutenant reenacted how the Viet Cong secured two intersecting bamboo poles in the ground before placing a 122 mm missile in the crux of the 'V'. Instead of aiming the six-foot rocket at a certain angle, they guessed the proper trajectory. He even simulated lighting one and running away before the American Cobra helicopters flew over to lay down a steady stream of mini-gun fire. Our amusing host concluded by mentioning this inexact science of aiming the rockets caused many to fall short or stray off course.

Another first at the 175th began with a mysterious voice in the pitch-black room struggling to be heard above the clamor raging outside. "Don't freak out but we're under a rocket attack. Wake up your asshole buddy. Get your flack-jackets, helmets and go out the back way to the bomb shelter. And don't turn on the damn lights."

To abandon a deep sleep and attain full clarity within the blink of an eye required a body fueled by pure adrenaline. It fed off the siren blaring from HQ, the silent silhouettes running past the barracks, and the strained cursing of those in the other rooms. With outstretched arms, I took one exploratory step after another until an exposed shin banged against the metal frame of Owls' bunk. Without

knowing where his body lay, fumbling about could generate some unpleasant assumptions.

What if I grabbed little Owl by mistake?

Fate intervened when my hand seized a honker of a nose. In voice rising to be heard above the commotion swirling all around, I screamed, "Owl you airhead. We're under a rocket attack." A couple of tugs on the nose did more than any words could. From the depths of the shadows, his right hand swung up to knock mine away. Before Owl retaliated further, I used the wailing siren as an audible aid to illustrate we were under attack.

Once I was positive he would stay awake, the greater concern lay in getting to the bomb shelter before one hit. Just when it was needed most, a faulty brain could not recall where the helmet and flak vest were stored. Somewhere in the locker or possibly under the bunk. During a frantic search feeling around in the dark, a sensation of déjà vu dogged my efforts.

High above the drama a faint whistle passing overhead represented another rocket destined to unleash hell on the exposed airbase. At the same time, a muffled pop accompanied the rising round fired by the mortar crew dug in next to HQ. Learning the difference between incoming and outgoing was a skill every soldier was told to develop. If you wanted to stay alive.

After giving up all hope of finding the padded flak-jacket and heavy steel helmet, I felt along the wall with both hands until reaching the doorway. Out in a narrow hallway, I joined the other blind mice shuffling their feet toward the back screen door. A refreshing gust of wind greeted my arrival on a crowded back porch filled with nugs wondering what to do next. It was unsettling to look across at the dark outline of ops and see a flurry of movement near the guard tower. What were they up to? So much uncertainty fed an overactive imagination conjuring all manner of intrigue.

The old-timer who woke me was nicknamed Sergeant Dork for an obsession with following the rules. As our barracks chief, he was doubly insufferable and twice ignored. When this beacon of courage quietly called to us from between the

barracks, my initial reaction was to feign ignorance. “Over here everyone. Hunker down in the bomb shelter or be blown to bits.”

In the illumination of a brilliant moon, I spotted his flat-topped head sticking out of a sandbagged half-circular sheet of steel. At first, no one moved. Then a wayward rocket landed off to the left just beyond the perimeter. All of a sudden six anxious soldiers began squeezing in both ends of a shelter no larger than a VW punch bug. I hesitated till last not out of false bravado but, rather, a slight inclination toward claustrophobia. It proved beneficial to be half in and half out. Those in the middle of the mass of twisted arms and legs were definitely complaining the loudest during the wait for all clear.

Once the sirens’ call mercifully ceased, the chore of untangling the squirming meat puzzle began in earnest. Only later did I question what happened to the weapons and why no one was armed. Was the Captain fearful of giving us stopping power within the compound? It sure seemed so.



BY THE MIDDLE OF AUGUST, more than half the old-timers were mere memories to us tweeners who had to shoulder more of the responsibility. Though nowhere near done, every day the raw meat who arrived with wide eyes were becoming seasoned and salty to the taste.

The only person in camp I avoided with a passion just so happened to live across the hall. There were no words spoken in anger or fat mama jokes bantered about to cause such a reaction. His offense was in riding the white tiger and tossing the plastic vials it came in through a hole in the screen. In doing so, they turned a popular shortcut between the barracks into a minefield for anyone wearing flipflops.

All the newbies received a promotion to Specialist Four except for one operator who fell asleep in the guard tower next to ops during guard duty. If it had occurred in the field, the punishment would have ranged from a court-martial to fragging from a careless grenade. A delay in rank paled in comparison.

Up until now my head knew we were in a war zone. With the specter of death exposed during the recent rocket attack, my heart now sought solace one barrack over. I tried smoking cigarettes in Basic just to fit in. All it did was induce fits of coughing and make me the butt of everyone's jokes. Now I was ready and willing to sacrifice a virgin pair of lungs.

An elated Woody and Jed welcomed another brother to the cause. The transition to novice demanded total sacrifice and violent hacking with every hit. Eventually, a creeping euphoria enticed every nerve ending on my head to tingle from an electrified force field. Colors were washed in a brighter pallet within a setting of trippy tunes seducing a kaleidoscope of goofy expressions.

I achieved a state of blissfulness unknown to man. At least until the high wore off.



A FEW NIGHTS LATER, THE usual degenerates were hanging loose on the bunks in Woody's room laughing at any random shit anyone happened to say. In the middle of our foolishness, one of the old-timers rotating back to the States stormed in and sat next to Jed. Though originally from Puerto Rico, Roach had come from calling his wife who lived in the Harlem section of New York City. Our mellow mood was rapidly turning sour with every deep sigh he released.

It was common knowledge Roach refused to have sex with the camp prostitutes because, apparently, the little women conducted a vodou ritual on his penis. What he refused to divulge was the nature of the curse or the penalty for straying. But, abstaining from sex with a women for a year sure lent credence to his claim.

When the suspense became unbearable, I broke the tension with a lame joke. At least he stopped sighing and began to open up to four interested operators sitting at the edge of the bunks. "I'm totally tripping out. I haven't been able to get a hold of my wife for at least a week now and the last letter she sent was a month ago."

In the Camp Alpha indoctrination, we were warned about the real possibility of losing loved ones during the year fighting over here. I naturally assumed this was just such a case. Then Roach revealed a rather devious plot to get rich by manipulating the free mail service and the small audio cassette tapes we were allowed to send. Every morning Roach replaced the cassette tape with a baggie of heroin then mailed it. According to him, the odds of being busted were minimal because a love letter from a lonely soldier in Vietnam to his anxious wife would never be inspected. Therefore, the odds of getting busted were minimal.

While our brains marinated on the sheer luck of getting away with it for a year, he dropped some dope math into the mix. “Do any of you know the street value in Harlem for pure uncut heroin from one of the finest poppy fields in the world? It’s mind blowing. Even though we’re charging a high price, the dude she’s selling it to can cut the stuff ten times over and make a killing!”

From the twitch in a nervous left eye to the rapid toe tapping, the signs of a man on the edge were unmistakable. Roach went on to mention the only downside being the Army or Post Office catching on. Anyway, that’s what he thought until talking to the landlord instead of the little women. Not only had she moved out without leaving a forwarding address, he was sure one of the movers was a boyfriend.

How do you console someone who was either made a fool of by the ex or created a junkie with an unstoppable habit? Simple pats on the back were not going fix this. As the others tried, my mind drifted to a darker place. What of the curse? Did she lift it? The only true test meant using mini-roach as a test pilot of sorts. Would he fly high or crash and burn?



BY NOW, THE BRIEF MENTION of our neighbors in the ghost town next door and the club we supposedly shared were long forgotten fairytales. There was no reason to believe soldiers even manned the complex but if the stories were true? Those Fifth Cavalry grunts were the true warriors humping through the

jungle for a month or more at a time before coming back for some well-deserved R&R (rest and relaxation).

Our small circle of partyers swelled in rank with the addition of Sgt. Rock. So named for his gung-ho passion to kill VC. This proud immigrant from Greece told some unbelievable tales of family and relatives fighting the Germans during the big one in WWII. I imagine he felt some pressure to rival their deeds.

One of the positive side-effects to being a stoner was the incredible munchies it gave me. Such illusionary influence transformed the usual fare of slop into a prime rib dinner. As our entourage pushed past the screen doors to leave the mess hall, the unmistakable sound of a bugler blowing a cavalry charge echoed throughout the buildings. I watched enough cowboy and Indian movies to recognize the refrain. Once again, but closer, the call to charge was issued from the direction of the barracks.

Curiouser yet was the sizable red dust devil forming at the top of the incline and the unmistakable sounds of a stampeding herd. I stood in awe as a short redheaded manic crested the hill and full tilt downwards while blowing hard on the bugle. A rabid mob, equally covered from head-to-toe in jungle red, were fast on his heels. As the manmade whirlwind stormed past, there had to be at least fifty soldiers caked in mud yelling and screaming with a demonic fury.

Over the next few hours I hung out in Woody's room toking away to the sounds of mass pandemonium and several gunshots emanating from the club. Once the uproar became a downright bore, we ventured out of relative safety to witness a migration of staggering grunts trudging back up the hill. In their wake, a trail of crushed beer cans led the way to a front door still hanging on by one hinge. Woody gently moved it aside to gain entrance to the aftermath of a riot. If something was not broken, it was soaked in beer.

Navigating a cement floor sprinkled with glass from a host of broken liquor bottles was risky business. The entire scene reminded me of those old western movies where the saloon was broken up in an all-out brawl between cowboys and the townsfolk. Only the main bar and a couple of stools remained unscathed in a

setting of wooden chair parts strewn among knocked over tables. There were a couple of small holes in the ceiling from the gunfire we had heard and a half-naked Vietnamese waitress lying dazed and confused in one pile of rubble. She was apparently unhurt but suffering some sort of psychotic break.

After seeing how real men partied, how could I not feel inferior.

The very next morning Sgt. Rock found me standing in line waiting to chow down on another award-winning breakfast. If there was any justice in this man's Army, a picture of the head cook would be prominent on wanted dead-or-alive posters plastered around camp.

Yesterday, when we checked out the club scene, I noticed him laughing and joking with one of the still functioning grunts. Now, he was trying to enlist my help in obtaining some personal weapons. No one in camp was happy living in jeopardy while our weapons were securely locked in the ammo room. Sgt. Rock most of all. Which is why he set up a weapons buy next door and was enlisting my talents as a pack mule.

The Army did not bring us here to run loose in the jungle killing VC by the truckload. And I freely admit to being a liability in a firefight. Yet even a cornered rat knows how to flick off the safety and pull the trigger. Any arguments against having weapons was reinforced by a mortar pit manned by the most motley of volunteers. When one of the geniuses dialed in the wrong coordinates, the explosive round dropped inside the tube shot straight up in the air. The resulting detonation blew apart a Cobra attack helicopter innocently parked on a helopad on the far side of the compound where it should have been safe.

After scraping most of the breakfast into a large trash can, we walked the short distance out of the compound and into the Fifth Cav's without any hassle from either MP playing guard dog at the front gates. In a layout remarkably similar to ours, it was easy to find the guy's hooch. Right after entering the room, I did an about-face and was ready to leave until a friendly voice asked, "What's shaking? Come on in fellas."

Anyone else would have made the same mistake of assuming this was the armory. An array of weaponry was littered haphazardly around the room and on both bunks while over in one corner corresponding ammo cases were stacked high. The Rocks' eyes bugged out and an expression reserved for starry-eyed children at Christmas was plastered across a beaming face.

As the two engaged in some intense haggling, I examined some of the more unusual weapons. When it was all said and done, they settled on a month of his pay for an arsenal of one M-79 Grenade Launcher, two M-16 rifles, and two Russian made AK-47's. A fair amount of ammo was thrown in along with some basic instructions on the best way to use them. Like how to tape two AK-47 ammo-clips together for twice the firepower before a reload was necessary. He called it banana-clipping because of the way the two magazines curved.

As both of us labored under the immense weight, Sgt. Rock explained the rationale in buying so many. During the next rocket attack, everyone in the growing clique would converge on his room to gear up. Then, we would storm the front gate to fortify it before any VC could enter the compound.

Even in theory it sounded flawed at best. I mean, he was talking about us and not the real GI Joes.