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Medics Wild!

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Dedication:

To all the grunts and aviators who fought in Vietnam and so often got the short end of the stick, and in particular to PFC Carlin M. Campbell Jr., KIA 1967, Lt. William C. Ryan, KIA 1969 and to SFC Gregory Sorenson, who survived two tours and a purple heart but died tragically in an accident a few years later. Let us not forget.

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Author's Note:

The characters in this book are drawn from memories thirty years old now. They are composites of people I knew and worked with during two tours of Vietnam with several different medical units. Some characters may superficially resemble people I knew, but I wish to state most emphatically that the actions and personalities described here are not intended to depict real persons or events that may have occurred. If any of my old buddies read this book and think they recognize portions of themselves, well, just kick back fellows and enjoy some laughs and share some memories with me.

For dramatic purposes, I took a few liberties with the actual organization of medical units in Vietnam, particularly with the chain of command. My apologies to the men and women who were in the medical units there and wore the patch of the 44th Medical Brigade.

A final note to the men who did the real fighting: relax, fellows. It wasn't really that bad back behind the lines.

Darrell Bain

Chapter One

In early 1968, the huge Long Binh compound north of Saigon swarmed with activity. Helicopters rose and descended, raising clouds of red dust. Trucks and jeeps and boxy ambulances scurried here and there on various errands, adding more finely ground laterite particles to the air. Troops in from the field crowded exchanges and wandered the tangle of roads with thumbs out, seeking rides. Even this early, nearing noon, the NCO and Officer's clubs were busy dispensing food and liquor to off shift soldiers. Inside other buildings, nurses and doctors labored with the wounded and field laboratories were busy processing blood and body fluids. Generals and Colonels gave orders, Majors and Captains fleshed them out and Sergeants and Privates typed and distributed them. Logistic and Engineering units were working busily to keep the compound supplied and maintained. The war was approaching its high tide and all the activity reflected a surge of optimism that with just a little more effort, the war could be won. All of Long Binh seethed with activity. Almost all, that is.



North of the main compound, separated from it by several miles of jungle but connected to it by a laterite road like a baby amoebae pinching itself off from its parent lay a much smaller compound, fortified by enough barbed wire to fence off half of Texas. Inside this isolated ring of wire lived an oil-tanker battalion that transported aircraft fuel all over southern Vietnam. Here also lived the medical dispensary, which saw to the illnesses of the oil tanker drivers and their supporting staff and headquarters.

The tankers had driven off before daylight and sick call had been over for an hour. The compound was at low ebb.

Inside the dispensary building, Sergeant First Class James Williard was taking his ease. He was leaning back in a battered office chair with his feet propped atop a rickety folding desk, a relic of WW II, or perhaps even the First World War. Williard didn't mind the uncomfortable furniture. He had his fatigue cap pulled down over his eyes to block out the light and was letting the monotonous drone of generators in the background lull him to sleep, where he hoped the last residues of his hangover would dissipate. He was just dropping off when the hesitant sound of the screen door swinging open brought him back to awareness.

"Doc?" Williard recognized the tone of voice. An after-hours supplicant who was certain he would die horribly if he had to wait another day for treatment.

"Sick call's over. Come back tomorrow."

"Doc, I can't wait." The voice was plaintive.

Williard used one finger to tilt the bill of his cap up enough to see whom he was talking to. It proved to be a skinny, pimpled private in wrinkled fatigues and jungle boots. He approached Williard hesitantly, hands poised protectively near his groin. He looked as if he was a lone deer at a hunter's convention, more worried than ill. Sgt. Williard's reputation was known and feared throughout the compound for deferring malingerers and inhibiting the imagined sickly, regardless of the hour of day or night. The tanker drivers worked long hours, and stood guard duty every third night besides. They constantly looked for any good excuse to get out of a tanker run and catch up on some sleep. Since this boy wasn't driving, Williard deduced that he was probably on KP or pulling some other extra duty; otherwise, he would have already been gone for the day.

"Well, what's your problem, soldier?" Williard glared his worst



glare, letting the boy know exactly how he felt about him coming in so late in the morning.

The young hero fidgeted and turned pale, but stood his ground. "I got something wrong."

"Why weren't you here for sick call?"

"I didn't notice it til just now, Doc."

"Bullshit. You just didn't want to stand in line out in the rain. What's the matter? Did you think you might melt?"

"Honest, Doc, I really did just notice."

"Well, spit it out then. I ain't no fucking mind reader."

The young private was about to cry. "I think I got cancer."

"You think you got cancer, huh?" Williard sneered. "You don't look old enough to have graduated from medical school yet. You let me tell you what you got, understand?" He noted that the young soldier's lips were beginning to tremble and moderated his voice. "Awright, settle your young ass down. I ain't going to hurt you. Not yet anyway." Once Williard had his patient's attitude adjusted, he was always willing to listen. Gruff manner aside, he really did care about the health of the men. Besides, it had been a dull day. Maybe the kid did have something interesting wrong with him, though he doubted very seriously that it would turn out to be cancer.

"Where do you hurt?" He asked.

"I don't hurt, Doc. I just got like a growth."

"Damn it, soldier, I told you I ain't no fucking mind reader. Show it to me, for chrissake."

Reluctantly, the boy began unbuttoning his fatigue trousers. Williard's interest collapsed. Aw shit. Venereal warts. He had already seen enough of them to last a lifetime.

The boy pulled the foreskin back from the glans of his penis. The glans was no longer smooth. It was covered with pink cauliflower-like growths, mushrooming wetly over it in irregular clusters like a badly tended garden.

"Kid, you shoulda been in to see me a couple of weeks ago,"



Willard said, feeling sorry for the boy now.

"I didn't notice it until a while ago."

Williard wondered briefly what sort of hygiene they were teaching in basic training nowadays. Venereal warts were epidemic in uncircumcised males over here. They could be easily treated if caught early, but apparently, the young man had never been taught to pull his foreskin back and wash it every time he took a shower.

"Is it cancer?"

"Naw. Son, you just picked the wrong truck wash to dip your wick at. You've got an advanced case of Condyloma acuminata." Williard liked to use medical terms to impress his patients.

"Conda what?"

"Venereal warts."

"Can you cure them?" The private asked, looking anxiously down at his ravaged appendage.

"Yeah, but it would have been a hell of a lot simpler a couple of weeks ago. Wait one." Williard got up and walked the few steps to the screen door and pulled it open. "Hey Mop!" He called, loud enough for his voice to carry around the corner of the dispensary and into the enlisted hooch. A moment later Williard's records clerk popped inside.

"Yeah, Sarge, whatcha want?" Mop was a young swarthy mixture of Italian and Mexican ancestry, short and rapidly building a respectable belly from the beer he consumed in enormous quantities. He was married to a young plump wife whom he corresponded with irregularly between bouts of the clap, which was why he was called Mop.

"Pull this young hero's records for me, Mop."

While Mop got the private's name and began searching for his records, Williard picked up a bottle of black oily fluid, podophyllin in oil, and cotton swabs from a Conglomeration of his most used ointments and salves residing on a small table by his desk. He turned back to his patient.

"Keep the foreskin pulled back." The private flinched at the first touch of the swab, then relaxed when he found that it wasn't



going to hurt. Williard carefully covered the rampant growth with the podophyllin then told the boy to button back up.

"You gotta come in twice a day for treatment until it clears up," Williard said. He began writing on a standard army Rx form.

The private's eyes brightened. Twice a day meant no convoy duty. No driving. And maybe-- "Will I be on light duty?"

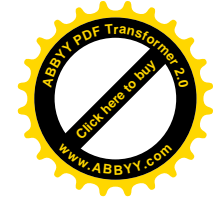
"Hell, no," Sgt. Williard said disgustedly. "What you think, we give light duty to every warty dick we see over here?" He handed the boy the RX form. "Here's your excuse from convoy duty, but you tell your field first I said to give you something to do in the compound, and don't try any horseshit about you ain't able to work. I get around, you know. If I don't see your young ass out stringing wire or pounding stakes, I'll be over to talk to your first sergeant. You hear?"

"Yes, sir," the private said, forgetting momentarily that he was addressing a sergeant. "Thanks, Doc."

Williard waved him away while he entered notes on the chart. The faint popping sound of a beer can being opened told him Mop was already back in the hooch so he tossed the chart into a basket for him to file later. He sat back for a moment, reflecting that being in a war zone was certainly nothing like he had imagined it would be. Before coming to Vietnam he imagined war as a glorious business and himself a heroic figure, treating the wounded under fire, saving lives, fearlessly leading his men against the villainous Viet Cong whenever they got close to his fallen patients. It wasn't like that at all.

The rear area army was like nothing he had ever imagined or heard of. He was appalled at the waste and inefficiency, the inordinate amount of time troops and officers alike spent drinking and chasing hookers and nurses, the wheeling and dealing and trading of favors and goods for their own benefit and the huge amount of army supplies funneled into the black market. And, he admitted to himself, he wasn't much better, even though he still did retain a certain amount of idealism. Some of the things he saw and did caused a degree of guilt, but he found it easier and easier to shrug it off. If this is the way a war was run, he could run with the best of them. He often wondered how it would all end. Most especially, he wondered if his own little empire would survive the inevitable shakeout but he wasn't about to give it up just to sit and look at dirty dicks every day. Not right now, anyway. He was having too much fun.

Williard got up and wandered through the length of the dispensary, past the records section, pharmacy (where he pocketed a



bottle of penicillin), treatment alcoves with their Spartan cots, empty except for one young driver shivering under blankets from a malaria attack, through a niche sporting a huffing antique autoclave sterilizing instruments used in the morning sick call, the X-Ray section, a supply room and on back to the lab, located at the very end of the building.

Heavy, the laboratory technician, was still there, standing in front of an old single ocular microscope propped on a chest high stand. Heavy's nametag read Baker, but no one ever called him that. He was squinting one eye and using the other to peer into the eyepiece of the microscope. He heard Williard's footsteps and looked up. "Malaria, all right," he said, then wove unsteadily to where he had an alcohol lamp burning beneath a water bath filled with test tubes. He checked the thermometer jutting up from the water bath and moved the lamp from beneath it.

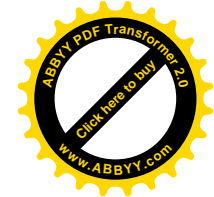
"I told you that this morning," Williard said. "Is it falciparum?" Falciparum was the worst species of malaria.

"Naw, malariae," Heavy said, naming a milder form of the disease.

"Good. Well, if his fever don't break in a couple of hours, you better take him in the cracker box over to the hospital." The cracker box was the boxy army ambulance Williard referred to. The dispensary owned two of them.

"OK, Sarge," Heavy said. Heavy got his name because of his weight. He was tall enough, but slim and weighed not much more than 130 pounds, soaking wet. He was a handsome young specialist five on his second hitch with an unfaithful wife back home who never wrote him except to ask for money. He also drank almost constantly, keeping his beer stacked in the same cooler used for blood plasma. When he ran out of money for beer, cheap as it was, he supplemented it with ethyl alcohol. He got the alcohol by telling Captain Harkness, the medical officer, that he needed it to carry out laboratory tests. Harkness didn't know enough about laboratory tests to argue with him so he signed off on the alcohol without argument.

Sgt. Williard allowed Heavy the deception with ethanol because occasionally, enemy activity closed the compound long enough for the club to run out of beer, or any other alcohol for that matter, and the lab provided an alternate source. Once, it had been closed so long that they even ran out of medical alcohol and Williard had prevailed on the old mama-san who cleaned their hooch and washed their fatigues to sneak him in something to drink. The day after his



request, she had proudly produced a large bottle of root wine. It was called root wine because a large root of indeterminable origin had been squeezed somehow through the narrow neck of the bottle and allowed to ferment there. The bottom third of the bottle was filled with a milky sediment, the middle third with the root, and the top third presumably consisted of wine. Whether it could be considered wine or not, it was certainly alcoholic. His hangover the next day had been of monumental proportions.

"Are you going to be in shape to drive if we have to send that malaria patient in?" Williard asked, noticing that the lab tech was unsteady on his feet as usual.

Heavy checked his thermometer and pushed the lamp back under the water bath. "I'll get Dum-Dum to drive him in. He's had a hard on the last two days." Dum-Dum was the pharmacy technician. He got his name from references to his intelligence. Dum-Dum wasn't retarded, but he came from so far back in the hills that sometimes it was hard to tell the difference. He had come back from his first encounter with a hooker with a beatific smile on his face and a willingness to drive anywhere, anytime, so long as the cracker box stopped off on the way to and from to let him get his ashes hauled.

Williard pulled open the blood plasma cooler and grabbed a beer. Seeing him, Heavy did likewise. Drinking on duty would never have been condoned back home, but over here no one seemed to care so he allowed a certain amount of it, amounting to about a dozen or so a morning in Heavy's case.

Heavy took a church key from a drawer of chemicals and opened both brews. He liked Sgt. Williard and hoped to one day emulate him, running his own dispensary if the war kept on and his liver lasted.

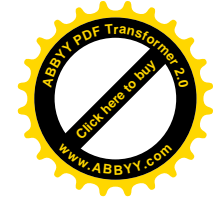
"You still seeing that nurse over at the Evac?" Williard asked, just making conversation until he finished his beer.

"Whenever I can."

"You oughta forget her. Get you a nice little hooker."

"Sarge, you look at all the rotten dicks I do, you wouldn't say that. Besides, I got a hooker, remember?"

Williard shrugged and polished off the rest of the beer. Heavy was right. The two of them had lately been consorting with a couple of sisters in Binh Hoa who only hooked on the side. He sniffed. "Is



something burning?"

""Ah, shit, I done cooked the serum again," Heavy cursed, pulling the lamp from beneath the water bath. It was too late. All the test tubes full of blood serum, which he was testing for syphilis, were coagulated as firmly as well cooked egg whites.

Williard gave his empty can to Heavy to dispose of. "You need to call the troops in for more samples?"

"Naw, I've learned to draw enough blood for two or three runs, but crap! Can't you find me a modern water bath, Sarge? This is ridiculous. Back in the world they've had them for forty years."

"The army concentrates on how much oil we got in our jeeps, not water baths, but go ahead and put in a requisition. You may even get it sometime after we've finished fucking around in this country. Don't get your hopes up, though. The government is going to have to buy my brother another new plane."

"Did he get shot down again?"

"Yeah, I got a letter from him yesterday. This time he went down over the water and spent two days just laying around on a raft and catching up on his sleep. Luckiest bastard I ever heard of. If he wasn't family, I'd think he had a deal with the devil."

"Was he drunk again?"

"Probably, but what the shit. Them marines drink more than you do."

"Impossible," Heavy said. "You want another?" He shoved aside some blood plasma and pulled a second beer from the cooler.

"No thanks. I've gotta get going. Don't forget your patient back there. If you and Dum have to take him in, get Mop to cover the duty. In fact, do it regardless. You ain't going to last the afternoon, the way you're going."

"OK," Heavy said, gratified. Screw the tests. He could do them again tomorrow morning. Syphilis wouldn't get any worse before then.

Williard tooled out of the dispensary, confident it would be left in good hands. Mop might tap Heavy's beer supply, but he never seemed to get too drunk to function, regardless of how much he



drank. In that way, Mop reminded him of his brother Jason, who managed to fly Marine F-4's all over north and South Vietnam with a load on. Sometimes he worried about his younger brother, but not too often. He was filled with shit-house luck, regardless of how many planes he lost. He just wondered how much longer the government would put up with it. This latest made four fifteen million dollar jets he had bailed out of and he was still only a third of the way through his tour.

That reminded him, there was a regulation which forced the services to let relatives serve at the same station under certain conditions. He could request a transfer if he wanted to, up north to Chu Lai where Jason drank and flew and fucked as if there were no tomorrow, but he wasn't certain that such a move would suit his own career, even though it might be a nice change of pace. See some new country, see his brother, check out the hookers and nurses up there. It was even possible he might get to see his other younger brother, Jerry, an ensign on a destroyer which plied the coastal waters and sometimes came into a port near there. They could have a real family re-union. It was a thought, but not one to be acted on just yet. Right now, he had to see Captain Harkness and tell him he was going to be gone for the afternoon. He needed to raise some money for poker tonight.

Chapter Two

Sgt. Williard left Heavy to his beer and cussing as he pulled off enough blood serum for another test run the next day. He stopped momentarily at the supply room and picked up a case of army issue insect repellent. The dispensary was authorized a case a week of the vile smelling stuff, but no one ever used it. Any insect so foolish as to bite one of the medics soon flew off in a drunken stupor, and what parasites they left behind perished in bloodstreams never designed for self-respecting disease bugs, they not having been evolved to live in an alcohol environment. He dropped the case of repellent into the back of the dispensary's jeep then continued on a few more steps to the officer's hooch, a medium sized tent with a plank floor where Captain Harkness and Captain Duarez, the two medical officers lived.

Captain Bradley Harkness, M.D., was just getting ready to close the beaded curtains around his bunk and duck inside for a quick nooner with his housegirl, Junie, when he spotted Sgt. Williard



through the raised tent flaps of the hooch, coming his way. He hurriedly finished the operation, concealing the already half-naked little girl curled up on his bed. He knew that Williard knew what went on between them but it was rather embarrassing at times. He stepped quickly to his desk and sat down as Williard entered the tent.

"Hey Sarge," he said.

"Hi Doc. What's going on?"

"Not much. Just some, uh, paperwork I need to get caught up on."

"Good," Williard said. "I need the jeep this afternoon."

Williard put it as a request, but Harkness caught the assumption in his voice that it was a foregone conclusion, which it was. Somehow, in the few short months the sergeant had been assigned to the dispensary he had taken the reins of command from his hands and placed them firmly in his own.

"No problem. Say, who was that I heard you calling?"

"Mop. I had a late patient."

"Mop?"

"You know, Manson, the records clerk."

"When did you start calling him Mop?"

"Since he mopped up on his fourth dose of the clap, that's when. He always gets in such a hurry he forgets to take his Ampicillin beforehand like I told him to."

Harkness nodded. He had come to respect Williard's medical knowledge, though some of his treatments were rather disconcerting. Prophylactic ingestion of antibiotics before intercourse wasn't something he had learned in medical school. It might be a little unorthodox, contribute to the development of resistant strains of gonorrhea and syphilis, and not something he would advise in private practice but it did seem to work, just as some other of the sergeant's radical treatments did. It was discomfiting in a way, but Willard was always discomfiting.

"Anything special with the patient?"



"Naw. Just some warts."

Harkness nodded again. Theoretically, as an M.D. and unit commander, he was supposed to see and treat all patients, but the wet blanket-like humidity and ennui of spending most of his time behind the barbed wire barrier of the tanker battalion had sapped his will until he really didn't care much anymore, especially when he thought of how much money he could be earning had he not been drafted. Besides, he knew it would do no good to protest. Williard had some sort of hold over Major Burk, the battalion commander, who gave him the freedom to run the dispensary to suit himself. If he tried to interfere with Williard, he might suddenly find himself assigned to a fire base out in the boonies, dodging mortar and rocket fire.

A rattle from the beaded entrance curtain interrupted his thoughts. Captain Jamie Duarez, the other medical officer stepped inside.

Duarez nodded to Williard, then spoke to Harkness. "Hey, Brad, where's the keys to the jeep? I want to go somewhere."

"Sorry, Jamie," Harkness said. "The Sarge has them."

Duarez turned to Williard. "Well, I need them, Sarge."

"Can't help you, Doc," Williard said. "I've got some company business to take care of."

"My ass. I know what kind of company business you're up to. I saw that case of bug spray in the jeep. Put it back and give me the keys." Duarez's little brown face twitched with anger.

"Sarge, maybe you'd better--" Harkness began a half-hearted intervention.

Williard interrupted, a look of perfect innocence on his face. "Sir, Major Burk told me they were short of insect repellent at battalion. I guess I better run it on over there before he gets upset."

"Damn it, who's running this fucking outfit, anyway?" Duarez said, but it was a rather lame reply under the circumstances. Unlike Harkness, Duarez was a career officer. Major Burk, the Battalion commander, controlled his efficiency ratings and he knew Williard controlled Major Burk.

Harkness forbore to answer. Duarez stood indecisive for a moment then stormed out of the tent, muttering epithets.



"You better watch him, Doc. He'll cause us trouble one of these days, especially if he takes it in his head to complain to Colonel Pinkerton."

"Relax, Sarge. He's just mad because you get to see most of the patients," Harkness said, hoping that was all it was.

"Hell, I let him see two patients just this morning. If he wasn't so damn slow maybe I'd let him inside more often, but he takes too much time. Besides, there's not much here I can't handle."

Harkness knew this to be true. There was little in the way of illness or injury among the healthy young men driving the oil tankers that the sergeant couldn't handle. Even when the rare wound from a sniper or a mortar round occurred, Williard had proved that he knew as much emergency first aid as either of them, and that was all the dispensary was set up for. Any injury requiring surgery was evaced to a hospital.

"I guess you can handle most of it. Are you really going to see Major Burk?"

"Yeah, I think I'd better stop at Battalion first thing. Major Burk probably needs to know how things are going here, just in case Captain Duarez manages to hitch a ride and does go see the Colonel. In fact, I better get on my way. See you later, Doc."

"OK, Sarge." Harkness knew Williard really would stop by battalion headquarters and that Captain Duarez would probably be one of the subjects of conversation. He wondered momentarily how the sergeant managed to keep the battalion commander under his thumb and also where else he might be going, then decided he really didn't want to know. So far, he had stayed away from Williard's dealings. If he ever got caught, he didn't want to be named as an accessory. Besides, he already had everything he wanted out of the war and she was waiting. He got up from the desk and parted the curtains around his bunk.

"You no work?" Junie asked. Harkness called her Junie because he couldn't pronounce her Vietnamese name.

"No work," He said, sitting down on the edge of bed Williard had scrounged for him from an Air Force buddy further up the road in Long Binh. It was much wider and more comfortable than the cots the unit was authorized. He had been delighted at the time, but later on he realized it was just one of the many methods Williard used to



insinuate himself into nominal command of the unit. What if Colonel Pinkerton, that paragon of propriety, ever saw it and asked how it came to be in his hooch?

"No work number one," Junie giggled, helping him off with his boots. Soon, he was stretched out supine with the tiny girl bouncing up and down energetically atop him, her little girl breasts completely covered by his hands. The first time after committing the act with Junie he had been unable to sleep. The girl couldn't be more than fifteen, grounds for a child molestation charge back home, but her ministrations soon cured him of qualms, especially whenever he thought of how hard it was to get his wife in bed nowadays. And what the hell, everyone over here did it. It was too easy not to, married or not.

As he left the officer's hooch, Williard saw Harkness slip into the curtained off alcove around his bunk. Imagining what would shortly be going on there made the decision on where to dispose of the case of insecticide easy, that is if Twe was there. He stopped by the enlisted hooch and picked up his army issue .45 pistol. He always carried it when leaving the compound, just in case of a breakdown on the way back along the jungle shrouded road between the tanker compound and long Binh proper. There had been one jeep a few weeks before which had been delayed a couple of hours and tried to make it back after dark. None of the occupants had survived. The bullet-riddled jeep, recovered the next day, was still displayed near the compound gate as a reminder to other late travelers. Williard paid it little attention. If for some reason he was delayed, there were several hangouts along the way where he could stay overnight and the girls would be most happy to entertain him. He hoped nothing like that would happen, though. If he used his time judiciously, not only would he be back well before dark, he would return with money in his pocket, Captain Duarez stopped, and plenty of time for a good poker game.

Once out of the compound, he drove swiftly, leaving the heavily wired and guarded gate behind. He drove along a laterite road built by army engineers, as dusky red as a two-day-old sunburn. It was enclosed on both sides by jungle, where Charlie roamed at night and slept during the day, the abode of the infrequent snipers and mortar crews who kept the compound always alert. Several miles along the way, the laterite road ended where a paved road began, also courtesy of army engineers. Here at the crossroads, a small village had grown, composed mostly of huts made of corrugated tin, tarpaper and flattened beer cans.



Willard parked his jeep in front of one of the huts and was immediately assailed by a herd of kids in boxer shorts, attempting to sell him everything from a cold soda to a hot sister. He passed a fifty-piaster note to the oldest looking boy, pointed to his jeep and said, "You watch!" The kid made the bill disappear, jumped into the front seat of the jeep and began jabbering at the rest of the kids, no doubt telling them to just be patient and there would be something in the deal for them, too.

A pretty young Vietnamese woman in the traditional ai dong pants dress opened the door of the hut as he approached. When she saw who it was, she flung herself into his arms. "Willy, Willy! Why you not come Sunday?"

"I was in church," Williard said, glancing up to be sure there was no lightning in the air.

"No mattah. What you got?"

"Bug spray. You can sell it to Charlie so the mosquitoes don't spoil his aim. They ain't hit no one in three weeks."

"Ah, you make joke. Let me see."

"In the jeep. You got a beer for me?"

"Foh sure." She produced a Ballentine, which if consumed in quantity produced a hangover not much less excruciating than root wine. It was so bad that the NCO club was selling it for a nickel a can and getting few takers. Williard used the church key the woman produced with the beer to pop the top and drank sparingly while Minh wah, the proprietor, looked over his wares.

"Two thousand P," she said, abbreviating the piaster monetary units.

"Three thousand."

"No, no. Twenty-two. No more. Army bug stuff number ten."

"Number one," Willard said. He wasn't really interested in negotiating, being pressed for time, but he knew if he didn't, the next transaction would go for a lesser sum than it deserved.

"Twenty three. You also get Twe, one half hour."



That made the difference. Twe was an import from Taiwan, and she had breasts, which were perhaps augmented, but were nevertheless of almost stateside proportions. Considering the usual displacement of the homegrown hookers, it was a deal he felt worthwhile. Besides, Twe was either a consummate actress or really did enjoy his attentions. He had never decided which, and right now, he really didn't care. It had been several days since the last time he had seen her and he wasn't inclined to argue.

"OK," Williard said, pocketing his keys. Major Burk could wait for a while.

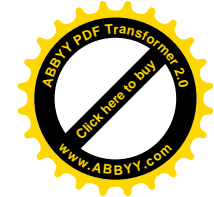
A little later, dressed only in fatigue pants, and while Twe cooled his sweat-soaked body with a fan, he pondered over the deal just completed. Before coming to Vietnam, he would never have considered selling army property for his own gain. He tried desultorily to feel guilty about it, but wasn't noticeably successful. The dispensary had no real use for the stuff. If he didn't dispose of it, it would just sit there while the cans slowly rusted through. Besides, he didn't like to use his own money for poker, and as far as that went, it was a peccadillo compared to some of the operations he knew of that were going on. A war zone sure is a strange place, he thought. I wonder if I'll even feel like staying in the army after the war is over. He glanced at his watch. Whoops! Better go talk to Major Burk or I might not even last that long!

Chapter Three

While Sgt. Williard was admiring drops of sweat trickling down the slopes of Twe's really lovely breasts, a deuce and a half passed along the road. A seething Captain Duarez sat on a hard bench inside the canvas covered bed of the truck, holding tight to his seat as the truck bumped and rattled along the road. What a way for an officer to have to travel, he thought, when a mere sergeant was using transportation that rightfully should have been his. He decided right then not to take it anymore. He knocked on the rear window. One of the three enlisted men sitting in front cranked it open.

"Can you drop me off at the medical brigade headquarters?" He shouted over the wind.

"OK, Doc, but we can't wait. You'll have to find your own way



back."

That figured. However, if the colonel listened to him it might not happen again. While he endured the jouncing, he considered what he was going to say to Col. Pinkerton. Missing or misappropriated medicine and alcohol? No, best to leave that area alone. He had sneaked a few pills from the pharmacy on occasion himself. How about the fact that the sergeant was seeing and treating most of the patients himself, rather than the doctors? Perhaps--but wouldn't that implicate Harkness as commander of the dispensary? Well, that was Harkness' lookout. If he was more interested in playing with his little baby-doll than running a medical unit the way it should be run, then whatever happened would be no fault of his. Now, how to go about it? A huge pothole bounced him into the air. His head hit one of the canopy supports. Duarez saw stars. One of the stars coalesced into an idea. Vehicle Maintenance! The colonel was crazy about vehicles! Thirty minutes later, he was sitting in the colonel's office.

Colonel Pinkerton, commander of the medical brigade, was a failed doctor who had once wanted to be an automotive engineer. His parents persuaded him into medical school where he graduated near the bottom of his class. After struggling unsuccessfully for several years to build a practice, he finally joined the army and there found his niche as an administrator. He commanded the medical brigade by wrathfully inspecting equipment and vehicles as if the was would be won or lost depending on whether its jeeps and ambulances had their full quota of oil or not. He had been known to convene courts-martials for unwashed jeeps or incomplete vehicle maintenance logs. He was so devoted to his vehicles that little else interested him, not even sex. It was as if his mental development had been halted as soon as he was old enough for a driver's license and ever since had sublimated his other drives to cars and trucks. He fawned over oil dipsticks as if they were phallic symbols of his own repressed drives.

The colonel also held the firm opinion that enlisted men were not capable of pissing downwind without direction from his officers, and himself in particular, which was why he was leaning so intently forward in his chair, listening to Captain Duarez's insinuations about Sgt. Williard.

"Williard. Didn't he just get promoted to Sergeant First Class? Seems as if I remember what high scores he had on his evaluation."

"Yes, sir. That's the one. In fact, if you just look at the surface of things, Sgt. Williard is running a top-notch dispensary."



"I know. Now that I'm reminded, I remember my last inspection. The vehicles were all in perfect condition and the maintenance logs had not a single error."

"Yes, sir," Duarez, said, letting his voice hang in the air, saying nothing but implying much.

"And so was the dispensary and its records."

"Yes, sir. Have you ever known an enlisted man to be so perfect?"

"Never," Pinkerton agreed. "So, what you're saying, if I understand you right, is that Sgt. Williard is running things to suit himself and covering up irregularities. Is that right?"

"Uh, yes, sir. And the vehicles. I think the Sergeant is taking them off the compound for personal use rather than official business."

Blasphemy! "He is, is he? Well, I'm sure Captain Harkness will take care of that as soon as I mention it to him. By the way, why did you come to me instead of your own commander?" Pinkerton's bald forehead wrinkled in puzzlement.

"Well, sir, knowing how you feel about the importance of our transportation, and how you're ultimately responsible for all the medical units under your command, I just thought you were the person to come to. Besides, I think Captain Harkness might be an accomplice." The last statement just slipped out before Duarez could contain himself.

That was the wrong thing to say. Colonel Pinkerton held a lowly opinion of enlisted men, but on the other hand, he thought officers could do no wrong. Or not much, anyway. His puzzlement changed to indignation. "Now, Captain, surely you're not implying that one of our own officers could possibly be mixed up with black-marketing, falsification of medical records and worse, manipulation of vehicle logs. I just don't believe that's possible."

Duarez thought the colonel must be singularly naive if he thought all officers were as puritanical as himself, but he wasn't about to argue. "I guess you're right, sir. Captain Harkness would never be mixed up in anything like that."

"Of course not. It must all be the sergeant's fault. Well, Captain, thank-you for stopping by. I'll look into this matter right



away."

"Thank-you, sir." Duarez saluted and left. So much for SFC James Williard, he thought.

As soon as he was out the door, Pinkerton shouted for his orderly. A PFC in starched jungle fatigues popped into the office.

"Sir!"

"Jackson, get yourself over to battalion headquarters and bring Major Burk back here with you. And tell him to bring Sgt. James Williard's personnel file with him."

"Yes, sir!"

Twenty minutes later, Major Burk was being raked over the coals by Colonel Pinkerton. He stood at rigid attention while the colonel lit into him.

"Major Burk, I do not believe in perfection, most especially perfection from enlisted men, and perfection from Sergeant James E. Williard in particular. His is the only unit in the brigade which always has perfect maintenance logs and perfectly maintained vehicles. Sgt. Williard also received a perfect score from the promotion board when he got his last stripe. His dispensary records and operations also appear to be without blemish. You will please explain this perfection to me." Colonel Pinkerton's mostly bald forehead wrinkled in concentration, as if by thinking hard enough, he might pull the information from Major Burk's brain through sheer mental effort.

It was a good thing for both the major and Sgt. Williard he was unable to. Major Burk knew that the dispensary's vehicles were always in perfect shape because Sgt. Williard traded penicillin to the tanker mechanics on the compound for them to do the maintenance for the unit, not trusting his own troops. They were all good medics according to the sergeant, but he didn't have much to say about their mechanical ability. Besides, Burk knew that as soon as morning sick call was finished each day, most of them became more interested in checking hookers than dipsticks, that is if they were sober enough to be interested in sex.

"Colonel, sir, I guess the promotion board was impressed by the way Sgt. Williard runs his unit, especially equipment maintenance." Actually, he knew that the promotion board had been influenced more by the sergeant's impressive medical knowledge than



the maintenance records of the dispensary, but no one had dared mention that to the colonel. A clandestine bottle of penicillin passed to the clerk compiling the scores hadn't hurt, either.

"I would be impressed myself if I believed it, which I don't. I always find discrepancies on my inspections, except for that dispensary. Why, do you know, just yesterday, I found a jeep that was a quarter of a quart low on oil. Not only that, no one had signed the log that day!"

Major Burk wished he could sit down. His feet hurt and his dignity hurt even worse. He knew the miscreant the Colonel was referring to. "Sir, we did have heavy casualties that day. The driver spent all his time helping out the ambulance crew."

"That's no excuse. This man's army runs on wheels, and if our vehicles are not properly maintained, we might fail in carrying out our mission."

"Yes, sir," Major Burk said. Now his upper lip was itching, right at the edge of his mouth where he had failed to properly trim the fighter pilot's mustache he affected. The stray hairs wove and bobbed in the breeze from the window air conditioner, making the itch worse.

The colonel continued, "Now, what I'm going to do is have a surprise inspection of that dispensary tomorrow morning. I'm going to find out just what's going on up there, or my name isn't Colonel Horace L. Pinkerton, by God!"

Major Burk sighed with relief, but not too heavily, lest the Colonel notice. There would be plenty of time to warn Sgt. Williard. "Yes, sir," he said again, reverently.

"All right, then, Major. Dismissed. Go see to your vehicles."

Lest the Colonel be watching, Major Burk conscientiously raised the hood of his jeep and checked the oil before driving off. On the way back to battalion, he wondered what Sgt. Williard had been up to this time. Burk was another failed doctor. He had long since forgotten what little medical knowledge he had once gleaned from Mississippi Polytech & Medical College, an institution of dubious credibility in the first place. He substituted for his lack of medical acumen with a rigid adherence to the policies decreed by Colonel Pinkerton and most especially to Sgt. Williard's desires. The reason for this was that back in the states, Williard had covered the major's ass one time when he tried to do an appendectomy on a general's daughter and got sidetracked by the girl's perky young breasts.



Williard had steered the major's wayward hands back to the proper area for the operation, then later quieted the operating room nurse's outrage in a manner horizontal but quite practical. His relationship with Williard had grown since then. He admired the sergeant and only wished he could wheel and deal as effectively as he did.

Immediately upon returning to battalion, he hurried into his office and closed the door. He picked up the green army hand phone and cranked the handle.

"What unit?" The operator asked.

"309th Medical Dispensary."

"Sorry, sir, that line is inoperable. We just got word from an incoming messenger that a mortar round hit the transformer."

"Well, when will it be back up?" Major Burk tugged at his mustache in frustration. What if he couldn't get the word through to Williard?

"Hard to say. Maybe tomorrow, maybe the next day. Our last shipment of spare transformers turned out to have Miller beer in all the containers. Somebody needs to tell those shipping clerks that beer isn't our only priority up here." The operator sounded as if he were talking for effect rather than through conviction.

"I'll try later," Major Burk said, hooking the handset back in its cradle. Now what? He could trust Williard to have his maintenance logs and vehicles in perfect condition, but what if Colonel Pinkerton got aggravated at not getting his oil rag dirty and decided to inspect the dispensary operations? If he caught Sgt. Williard, instead of the doctors, seeing all the patients on morning sick call, cigar jutting from the side of his mouth as he railed at malingerers, it would be just as great a catastrophe as an untended flat tire. He was still wondering how to resolve the situation, perhaps by sending word through an unscheduled landing of an evac chopper if he could order it and still cover his ass, when his orderly knocked on the door.

"Sgt. Williard to see you, sir."

There is a God, Major Burk said to himself. "Send him in," he said aloud.

"Hi, Major," Sgt. Williard said, not bothering to salute. He plopped down in the visitor's chair and began peeling the wrapper off a cigar.



"Make damn sure you're not smoking one of those things tomorrow morning, Sarge. The Colonel is coming to inspect you. It's supposed to be a surprise."

Williard lit his cigar before answering. "No sweat. What time is he coming?"

"First thing in the morning."

"Ah, shit. You mean I got to let them docs see patients? That's where I work a lot of my, uh, favors. You know?"

"I'm afraid so. It's not likely he will be interested in much more than water in the radiators, but don't take a chance."

"I won't. I sure feel sorry for my patients, though. Them docs don't know anything but stateside medicine, and not much of that. How you doing at poker lately?"

"Not so good. I could use a little cash until payday."

Williard pulled out his roll of recently acquired piasters. "I keep telling you, don't try for them inside straights, you'll lose every time." He passed over the whole wad in appreciation of the major's warning.

"Thanks, Sarge. I'll pay you back soon as I get paid. Or sooner if my luck ever changes."

Williard waved the thanks aside, knowing he would never be reimbursed, but he figured it was money well spent. "Guess I better be getting on back, since I got vehicles to maintain." He rose to his feet.

"There's one other thing."

"Yeah, what's that?"

"There's this nurse here I was seeing, but all of a sudden she's talking about some guy named 'Heavy'. Isn't that one of your medics?"

Williard laughed. "Don't worry about Heavy. He drinks so much I doubt he's doing her much good. I'll talk to him, though, if you want me to."



"Just ask him to keep his visits down to a minimum. Actually, I think she's just pissed off because I always seem to be busy when the dust-offs come in. She keeps telling me she wants to see me operate."

"Keep stalling. You're an administrator, not a surgeon."

"Right," Major Burk said, glad to have his opinion of himself confirmed by someone he respected.

"And if you can't stall, just make damn sure you stay away from appendectomies," Williard reminded him.

"Right," Major Burk said, remembering once again how Sgt. Williard had saved his ass. It was part of their unspoken bargain. Sgt. Williard took care of him and he took care of Williard, so far as he was able to, although so far, the sergeant seemed to have gotten the better of the deal. No matter. He touched his pocket where the roll of piasters resided. He could play poker again tonight, and this time, by God, he wouldn't draw to an inside straight. Unless, of course, he thought he would hit. Major Burk, unlike Sgt. Williard, believed poker was a game of luck rather than skill, which was why he was always in debt.

"I got *todie die mau*," Williard said, that being the expression for hauling ass in a hurry.

"OK. See you later."

Sgt. Williard drove away, confident that all pressing matters had been settled. Unfortunately, he failed to notice Colonel Pinkerton, who raised up from checking the oil level in a deuce and a half just in time to catch a glimpse of him leaving battalion headquarters. "Hmm," Pinkerton thought, then discarded the heresy. Surely an officer would not be conniving with a lowly enlisted man. Still... he checked his Timex, worn inside the wrist, British style. No, there was no time to get out to the tanker compound and back before dark, and he certainly wasn't going to risk harm to his own meticulously maintained customized jeep on that lonely road after dusk when Charlie was prowling. Give the colonel his due. He thought nothing of his own safety, but wheels were sacrosanct. Had there been any survivors of the last ambush along that road he would have had them courts-martialed in their hospital beds for failing to protect their vehicle. He still shuddered every time he remembered its bullet-riddled carcass. However, there was more than one way to skin a cat. Tomorrow, he thought he would inspect medical equipment and dispensary operations instead of vehicles. He looked sadly down at his oil rag. Sometimes sacrifices just had to be made.



He shoved it back into the holster where most officers carried their sidearms and went on to look at an idle cracker box. Out came the oil rag again.

On the way back to the tanker compound, Sgt. Williard began planning. Somehow, he had to figure out a way to get the colonel out of the dispensary as soon as possible should he inspect there. It wouldn't do to have the docs see so many patients that they began to like the idea and try to force a showdown. Besides, too many deals were made over medical charts. Suddenly an idea came to him. He grinned mirthfully to himself and put the pedal to the medal. This would take a little preparation, but he was sure he could pull it off, even if it would interfere with his poker for one night. The only hitch would be inducing the colonel to holster his oil rag long enough to get inside the dispensary and watch medical operations for a change. He needn't have worried. Colonel Pinkerton's sighting of him leaving battalion headquarters had already taken care of that matter.

As evening drew near, Sgt. Williard was making plans to utterly humiliate the Colonel, the Colonel was making plans to catch Sgt. Williard breaking regulations, and Major Burk was already drawing to his first inside straight, where he would lose as usual.

Chapter Four

The double barbed wire barrier at the entrance to the tanker compound looked a little the worse for wear from the time Williard had left that morning. The local Viet Cong were notoriously inaccurate with their sniping and infrequent mortar attacks, but this time they had scored a hit, blasting a hole in the wire guarding the entrance, although Williard doubted that was what they had aimed at. Usually, they tried for the full tankers as they revved up for the morning convoy, but were more likely to overshoot and blow up some jungle where their own troops were sniping from the other side. The local Viet Cong squads were mostly poorly trained and equipped, not like the North Vietnamese regulars who were beginning to be a real pain in the ass up north where his brother was stationed.

"Anybody get hurt?" Williard asked the gate guards as he pulled to a stop.



"Nah. Just blew up the gate this time, and damned if they didn't accidentally hit our transformer," a trooper answered. "We were all inside when it came in. You got some shrapnel in your bunker, though. I saw your docs digging in the sandbags after it was over, looking for souvenirs. Don't them guys have anything to do except fuck and drink?"

"They'll be busy tomorrow," Williard said. He figured the docs had dug out a few pieces of metal and would send them home to their wives to prove how dangerously they were living.

Williard arrived back at his unit just in time to see the docs heading toward the officer's club tent. He honked the horn and waved them back, then, an arm around the shoulder of each, guided them back into their officers hooch and huddled with them for thirty minutes of so.

"Geez, Sarge, you sure this scheme won't backfire on us?" Captain Harkness asked.

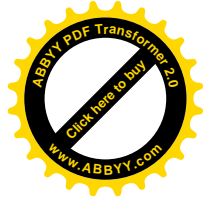
"Just do it like I got it planned, and I doubt the colonel will be back any time soon. In fact, he may never inspect us again."

"I still don't like it," Captain Duarez said. "What if he catches on?" He wondered who had tipped off the sergeant on the impending inspection, not that it mattered now. Harkness was going to go along with Williard's scheme and there was nothing he could do about it without exposing his own complicity at not seeing patients. And, secretly, he had to admire Williard's scheme. The man never seemed to be at a loss where his or the dispensary's welfare was concerned.

"Don't worry about it, Doc. Now if troopers bodies ran on oil, he might suspect something, but since we're biological type beings, he ain't got a prayer."

"I still don't like it."

Williard considered. He didn't particularly like Duarez, but bore him no real ill will even though he suspected it was him who had put Colonel Pinkerton up to his inspection. It was just another problem to solve in order to keep his own little empire going. What if Duarez were to have a sudden attack of conscience and start telling tales? Well, there was one way to take care of that. "Tell you what, Doc. We pull this off, I'll talk to one of the clerks in brigade about getting you a transfer to Vung Tau." He didn't make the offer to Harkness, knowing he would refuse. He was too enamored with his



underage housegirl to have any desire to leave the area.

"Vung Tau?" Duarez forgot all about trying to waylay the sergeant. "You got a deal."

Williard had known that would appeal to the captain. Vung Tau was a choice assignment, a base down river on the coast with pristine beaches, free flowing booze, and plenty of nurses, entertainers and red cross girls. If it was the captain who had put Colonel Pinkerton up to the surprise inspection, thoughts of Vung Tau should keep him happy and quiet tomorrow. Besides, he thought, I could use a little vacation myself. Get out from under all this bullshit for a few days and get some time to think. With Pinkerton after him, Duarez unhappy, and Harkness wavering, maybe it was time to pull in his horns a little. Or maybe not. See how the inspection goes first.

"I may have to request a three day pass to go down and check the accommodations out first," Williard said. "You know, find the best job for you and like that."

"What about your patients?" Harkness asked.

"Same deal as usual. I'll have Heavy see them, and he can call you if he runs into any problems. I'll review the charts when I get back." This was Williard's usual practice when he was gone. Heavy was Sgt. Williard's acknowledged apprentice and he was helping the young man acquire expertise in areas outside lab procedures. Williard felt like he had a lot of potential if he could just cut down on the booze a little.

"Can you keep him sober for three whole days?" Harkness said this as if questioning whether a politician could go three days without telling a lie.

"No, but I'll give him strict instructions to keep his beer out of the plasma cooler until after sick call each day."

"That ought to do it. OK, Sarge." Harkness agreed.

"Number one. See you in the morning. Be sure you wear starched fatigues."

Sgt. Williard followed up this conference by recruiting Mop and Sp/5 Jenson, an old veteran medical specialist. Jenson was usually referred to as the Junkman for his propensity of drifting through the days stoned on pot. It didn't seem to affect his work, although no one ever saw him move at a speed anything faster than the crawl of an

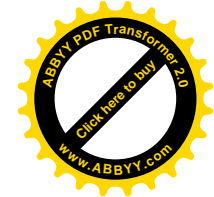


anemic turtle. This meeting lasted not even as long as the one he had with the officers, since the same technique he was planning to use on the colonel was essentially a duplicate of the one he had used to break in the docs a couple of months earlier when they had gotten a little uppity. He had used the same men then and they would know what to do. Since Mop and Junkman had been headed toward the enlisted club tent when he caught them anyway, they didn't mind the assignment. There, the two medics quickly found their recruits, leaving it up to Williard to make sure they would be at sick call the next morning. Since the drivers would much rather attend sick call than the usual convoy duty, there was an enthusiastic response.

Satisfied with all his arrangements so far, Williard headed for the NCO club tent. Having no extra money of his own to gamble with, he contented himself with passing up the nightly poker game in favor of booze. Over here, it was so cheap he figured he couldn't afford not to drink. While imbibing, he found several of the top sergeants of the tanker battalion and promised them invitations to a jungle juice party in order to ensure there would be no hassle with getting the drivers Junkman and Mop recruited in to sick call the next morning. God, he thought, I'm sure calling in a lot of credits. If I'm not careful, one of these days all this shit is going to blow up in my face. Maybe I should just stop all this crap and try for an OCS commission like Jason keeps telling me to. As he got more or less pleasantly inebriated, he considered the idea suggested by his brother, then finally discarded it. Not now, not when the whole fucking rear area war zone was such a bubbling cauldron of fun and games. Maybe later. He felt in his fatigue pocket, stuck his spare change into the slot machines, came up empty and stumbled off to bed.

Sgt. Williard and Heavy were the first up the next day. They made a practice of taking a half hour run around the compound each morning. Williard did it not only to keep himself in condition, but he liked for the tanker drivers to see that he was a devotee of exercise. The reason he liked to be seen was because that was his usual prescription for troopers complaining of back pain that he suspected of malingering. He ordered an exhausting regimen of exercise to strengthen their backs, ordered it to be carried out each morning before convoy duty. Lately he had very few complaints about back pain.

Heavy joined Williard because he was his idol and he tried very hard to emulate him in every way. Besides, the morning run helped to dissipate the alcoholic excesses of the previous day and induced his stomach to accept breakfast. At his weight, he needed all the calories



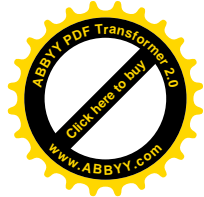
he could absorb to sustain life.

Sgt. Williard's favorite breakfast was S.O.S., an acronym for shit on a shingle, which was an accurate description of its appearance, although the army menus insisted on referring to it as creamed beef on toast. He liked it despite its appearance. He usually topped this off with eggs, bacon and fried potatoes. Williard never complained about army cooking, having grown up so poor that often the only thing in the house was beans and oatmeal. He never ate army oatmeal, but would sometimes sample the beans.

Run and breakfast finished, Williard and Heavy stripped off their fatigue jackets and tee shirts, washed off the sweat and changed into fresh starched tops, using the sweaty shirts to wipe dust off their jungle boots. By this time, it was nearing seven thirty and the sick call line was beginning to form. Heavy called it the hangover line. He was convinced that most of the troopers came on sick call because they feared to drive with the monstrous hangovers resulting from Ballentine beer. The enlisted club had lately taken to giving it away, since that was the only way they could get rid of it. Somewhere in the long supply line, a deal had been cut and all the huge Long Binh compound was suddenly flooded with Ballentine. The club management was working overtime trying to rid themselves of it before the troops began using full cans of the beer as blunt instruments to show their displeasure.

Sgt. Williard thought of sick call as the rotten peter line, since what he mostly saw on sick call was venereal disease, enough to sometimes make him think the Pope had the right idea and monogamy might have advantages he had never before considered. The thought was always a brief one, though. So long as penicillin and tetracycline was plentiful, there was little chance he would ever catch anything. On morning sick call, though, he wished the army would go back to the days of yore, when for a short time in the history of the army, prophylactic antibiotics had been issued to troops going on leave. He had heard that the practice was discontinued when the senate chairman of the armed forces committee, a southern moralist, heard about it. It was an ignorant and shortsighted policy so far as Williard was concerned, but then, if it weren't in effect he probably wouldn't have much to do.

Williard pushed past the line of waiting men who were beginning to look anxiously up at gathering clouds. It was nearing the end of the rainy season and likely as not, half of them would be soaked before getting in to see anyone about their real or imagined ills. Williard seated himself at his desk facing the entrance to the dispensary. To one side of him Junkman waited to assist. He was



staring blankly off into some vision of his own, residual pot smoke practically pouring from his ears. Nevertheless, his fatigues were freshly pressed and his boots clean. To the other side, Mop waited beside tiers of shelves holding medical records, waiting to pull, record or re-file as the morning progressed.

"Are the docs here yet?" Williard asked.

"They're already inside," Mop said.

"OK, let's get started." Williard looked longingly down at his upper fatigue pocket where his day's cigar ration was concealed. Ordinarily, he would just now be lighting his first one of the day, keeping it chewed, lit and unlit long enough to last through sick call. This morning he kept it unlit for a purpose. Colonel Pinkerton might or might not have chastised him for smoking it while screening patients, which according to army regulations was all he was supposed to do, but one never knew, and he purposely wasn't going to put it into his mouth because the first thing he intended to do was put Pinkerton off balance as soon as he showed up, then knock him off his feet with a follow-up punch. If he had little respect (though a genuine liking) for Harkness, he had even less for the Pinkerton. A full colonel who spent his time kicking tires and throwing tantrums about unwashed jeeps struck him as the epitome of an officer's corps gone as stale as a day old can of opened beer.

Williard had hardly gotten started with the patients when he heard a cry from outside. "Attenshun!" Someone shouted, and he knew Colonel Pinkerton had arrived. Not only that, he knew that the colonel must have foregone his usual scrutiny of radiator fluid and oil levels and headed directly for the dispensary building. He waited gleefully for the colonel to step inside.

"Attenshun," Williard called immediately as the colonel entered. Mop and Junkman popped to, but Williard didn't. He allowed a horrified look to cross his face.

"Colonel! I'll have to ask you to put that pipe out. There's no smoking in the medical area." He pointed an astounded finger toward the colonel's elaborately carved Indian pipe as if it were a Texas sidewinder coiled and ready to strike.

"What?"

"The pipe, sir," Williard repeated. "You'll have to put it out. This is a medical treatment area."



Colonel Pinkerton looked around in bewilderment. "Where--?"

There were no butt cans present. Heavy, who normally smoked four packs of Winstons a day had, according to Williard's instructions, carefully unhooked each one as he entered the front of the dispensary, then all the others right on back to his lab and stashed them out of sight.

"Take it outside, sir! A spark might get loose and blow up some of this here G.I. Gin!" Bottles of the concoction were arranged on his medicine table. G.I. Gin was a term used for army cough medicine, a combination of 50% grain alcohol, juniper berry flavoring and water and syrup. Toward the end of the month, right before payday, many lower grade troopers developed highly imaginary coughs and colds in order to get a prescription for G.I. Gin. Heavy claimed that in a pinch it wasn't bad, once you got past the juniper berry flavoring.

Colonel Pinkerton, not being disposed to blow up the dispensary, quickly retreated outside, causing another chorus of "attenshuns!" He disposed of the pipe dottle on the ground and tried to make out like he had just forgotten it in the throes of his inspection, since to his way of thinking, officers were never in the wrong. He was already off-balance, though, just as Williard had planned.

In the meantime, Williard had called the docs forward. They were waiting, starched, shined and alert when Colonel Pinkerton re-entered the building.

"Good morning, sir," they chorused. "Glad to see you!"

"So am I, Colonel. We got some medical problems here," Williard interposed.

"Problems?" The colonel responded, directing his question to the captains rather than the sergeant. Medical problems were an officer's responsibility.

"Yes, sir," Captain Harkness said. "I sure am glad to see you. Would you mind helping me out?"

"Certainly!" Colonel Pinkerton said, puffing out his chest. Although captains were officers, colonels, by the very fact of the eagles on their shoulders naturally were smarter, handsomer and knew far more than any captain ever would about oil levels, transmission fluids and army regulated air pressure in jeep tires. Only after he opened his mouth and put his foot in it did it occur to



the colonel that the medical officers were speaking of sick troopers rather than sick vehicles. By then, though, it was too late.

"Sir, would you mind examining this poor fellow?" Captain Harkness asked, pointing to the first supposed patient Williard had lined up, a private already primed by Heavy with an overdose of the last of the root wine Williard had been unable to finish, topped off with a liberal dose of G.I. Gin laced with a triple dose of juniper berry flavoring. The private wavered in place, bright red splotches of alcohol overdose appearing here and there on his shirtless body. "He must have some new tropical disease we haven't figured out yet."

Pinkerton felt for his pipe, then remembered that there was no smoking inside the dispensary. Red splotches? Dizziness? He didn't have a clue. "Um, Captain, perhaps we should send this trooper to the field hospital for evaluation." The wavering private grinned beatifically, anticipating several days of lounging under clean white sheets with attending round-eyed nurses while rear area doctors tried to transplant a tropical illness onto a simple case of root wine and juniper berry overdose. Forever after, he would be grateful to Sgt. Williard, and sooner or later, he had no doubt, the sergeant would be calling on him to return the favor.

"Yes, sir, thank you sir," Captain Harkness enthused. The next ringer stepped into the place vacated by the overdosed private. This one was a specialist fourth class with no apparent ills.

"What's wrong, son?" Sgt. Williard asked, so gently that it almost startled the specialist out of his role. He had been on sick call once before and Williard's change of attitude astounded him. The sergeant sounded almost human this morning!

"I need to see the doctor, Sarge," he said, recovering quickly.

"Why, certainly, son. I know we haven't been able to help you so far, but today we just happen to have our brigade commander present. No one knows more about medicine than he does. Why don't you show him what's wrong?"

"Oh, gosh, thanks, Sarge." The specialist pulled off his fatigue cap, revealing the top half of his head, which was covered with a stocking cap. He removed this and leaned forward to show the colonel a scalp almost completely bald and covered with old scar tissue and lonely tufts of hair sticking up like cacti in a desert. "There's something wrong with my head," he said, which was certainly true. He had caught a fungus infection, Tinea capitis, in Korea, a fairly common one which Williard had studied about and for which there



was nothing to be done, other than covering it with a stocking cap and pretending to be a hippie. The colonel, of course, didn't know that. "I think this man should be evacuated, too," the colonel said, giving Sgt. Williard one more grateful disciple. He would be returned to duty as soon as doctors in the field hospital looked at his records, but in the meantime, he too would have a few days of bliss in the field hospital and not have to drive one of the blasted oil tankers to wherever planes were short of fuel. He moved aside and let the next trooper come forward.

"Evacuate him, too," Colonel Pinkerton said, before even hearing the man's symptoms. He was far out of his depth and knew it.

"Yes, sir," Sgt. Williard said. "Gosh, evacuating all these troopers sure is going to put a strain on our vehicles. There's going to be a lot of wear and tear on them, ferrying these men back and forth."

Blasphemy! Colonel Pinkerton wavered back and forth between displaying his medical knowledge and the possibility of flat tires and low oil levels in the cracker box ambulances. He finally decided that he had better stop with the medical knowledge and try another tack. "Perhaps we should leave these capable medical officers to go about their business for now. I'd like to inspect the enlisted quarters. Can you spare Sgt. Williard, Captain Harkness?"

"Certainly, sir. After all, a medical doctor has to see all these patients and get them back to their maintenance duties." Harkness was more than ready to get Williard out of there before he collapsed from pent up laughter. Besides, the sooner the colonel finished his inspection, the sooner he could turn sick call back over to Williard and retire to his hooch to play with his little brown Lolita.

Pinkerton had gotten an insinuation of pilfering from mess halls at the tanker compound from Duarez and this was an area where he thought there was a possibility of finding a discrepancy. Maybe this uppity sergeant was the one stealing the food, and if he could prove it, he would damn sure bust him for it.

Sgt. Williard, with perfect military precision and manners conducted the colonel through the enlisted hooch. There were eight cots in the tent, sitting on the plank floor and sporting a brightly colored footlocker of low-grade tin in front of each, purchased from the Vietnamese vendors who were always clustered near the compound gate. To the rear of each cot were handmade closets of old packing crates, doors removed. In each crate hung several sets of clean fatigues, freshly laundered by their mama-san, a kindly old woman with only a few snaggly betel juice-stained red teeth



remaining in her mouth.

Pinkerton had never inspected the enlisted quarters before. Prior to this, he had always concentrated on the vehicles, but he already figured that was a lost cause. He knew he would find nothing wrong there. But here--"Sergeant, all these footlockers and wall lockers are non-regulation. I think I'll have to write up--"

"It's sad, sir," Williard interrupted before the colonel could commit himself. "We have requisitions on file for army foot lockers and wall lockers, but we've never received them. I think the air force must be diverting army gear to their own units. They don't have to spend their hard earned money for things the army should be supplying us. Even the captains had to buy their own foot lockers." He failed to mention the soft air force bunks the two medical officers owned, nor what went on during the day on those bunks.

"Still, non-regulation equipment in an army unit. I think--"

"It sure is non-regulation, sir. The men are really complaining. Why just the other day, I spent a whole hour talking them out of writing their Congressmen."

Pinkerton shut up about the footlockers. He slept on an air force bunk himself, and stowed his gear in air force foot and wall lockers. He had never bothered to inquire of his orderly where or how they had been obtained.

"That was commendable of you, Sergeant. One never knows how Congressmen might react to minor supply problems." Frustrated, he turned to leave. Then he spotted the refrigerator. It was a large white cooler, set in an alcove near Williard's own cot. "What's this?" he asked, remembering again the mention by Duarez that perhaps the enlisted men were eating better than was strictly authorized.

"That? Why that's where I keep condemned meat, sir."

"Let me see." Pinkerton strode to the refrigerator and swung open the door. Inside, neatly packaged, were enough steaks to feed a medium sized pack of hungry wolves. Each package was stamped US Grade A and beneath, US Army.

"This isn't condemned meat, Sergeant. Why this is the same kind of steak we officers keep--er, are fed in the mess hall."

"Oh, it's bad all right, sir. I condemned it myself and the mess



officer turned it right over to me."

"You condemned it! Sergeant, I can't go along with such non-regulation behavior. You aren't an authorized meat inspector, and since you aren't, I have no choice but to assume this meat has been stolen. You and that mess officer are in big trouble, Sergeant." At last! This so-called perfect sergeant was in a jam of his own making.

"Stolen? Oh, my no, Colonel, sir. No one in my command would ever steal anything. If the colonel will check my records at brigade headquarters, the colonel will see that I am a graduate of the army veterinary school course, of which I was tops in the class. Since there is no qualified officer present with the proper training, Captain Harkness appointed me as veterinary officer for the compound. I impounded that meat yesterday when I inspected the mess hall. I suspect it's contaminated." In the old horse army days, the army had real need of veterinary officers, but with the event of wheels and disposal of mules, that need had faded. The army, like bureaucracies everywhere, had not let its vet section die. In the modern army, it tended to officers' pet dogs and cats, and with what time that could be spared from this onerous undertaking, took upon itself the task of food inspection. Soon after Williard had gotten his third stripe, he had seen possibilities in the antiquated specialty. He had applied for, been accepted, and completed the four-week veterinary course several years ago.

Pinkerton's cheeks turned as red as a blushing bride. He felt for the comforting presence of the oil rag stuffed into his holster. He fingered it lovingly, like a child playing with his boo boo blanket. It gave him the courage to continue, even though he suspected he was well and truly outfoxed. "Well, I'm sure all the proper records will be in order, knowing of your reputation, but tell me this Sergeant: If this is condemned meat, why hasn't it been disposed of?"

"Why sir, I would never be guilty of disposing of potentially good meat simply on suspicion. Even now, my lab technician is running numerous complicated tests on this meat to be certain it is unfit before we dispose of it. In fact, most of those tests use alcohol-based reagents. I'm afraid I'm going to have to requisition an extra supply of ethyl alcohol to replace what he's using up."

Pinkerton, knowing nothing at all about laboratory procedures, had no way to argue with Williard's logic, but by God, there was one thing he could do. He could take the steaks with him and let his officers "dispose" of them. He said so.

"Oh, sir, I couldn't allow that. I have to be present to log the



disposal procedures. Regulations, you know."

"What sort of disposal, Sergeant?"

"We incinerate them, sir. Right there," Williard said, pointing to a lovingly crafted brick kiln located just in back of the hooch. The incinerator looked suspiciously like an open-air barbecue pit, but the colonel knew when he was beaten. He retreated with ill grace to his jeep and waved aside his enlisted driver while he checked the oil level, tire pressure and radiator fluid level himself. He folded part of his mind into those comforting routines while he let the rest of it roam into other realms, where officers were always exalted beings and sergeants were less than the dust beneath their chariot wheels. A reckoning would come, sooner or later, just as soon as he could figure out how to bring it about.

Chapter Five

Sgt. Williard fired up his big cigar as he stepped back through the entrance of the dispensary tent. "All clear," he said, looking back over his shoulder at the trail of dust left by Pinkerton's departing customized jeep. He viewed the jeep with as much disdain as he did the colonel. It sported chromed hubcaps, green metal flake exterior and a bright red canopy. All decoration and no substance, just like its driver, he thought. His evaluation of the colonel was fairly accurate, but he was dead wrong about the jeep.

Captain Harkness got up from the sergeant's desk, where he had been seeing as few patients as possible. He had their records neatly stacked aside for Williard to review and probably change most of his diagnosis and treatment regimes. "Is he gone?"

"He's not only gone, I don't think we have to worry about him coming back anytime soon. Just in case, though, I guess we better incinerate those condemned steaks in the cooler tonight. Be sure you sign off on mine and Heavy's documentation of them."

"Right. What time will you be incinerating that contaminated meat?"

"1900 sharp. You want to help see to disposal of the remains, come on over. By the way, Heavy's going to be requisitioning some extra alcohol for his lab tests on that there rotten meat. I'll get Dum-



Dum to make us up a potion of jungle juice to drink while we dispose of it."

"God, Sarge, I just signed off on five gallons last week. How many tests does Heavy have to run?"

"Lots. Say, why don't you invite Major Hollis over? He ain't got off the compound lately long enough to pick up his whiskey ration." Major Hollis was the compound commander and took his job very seriously. The only fly in his ointment was the dispensary medics, whom he had no control over. In the army scheme of things, the medics reported to their own headquarters and he had only limited authority over them. Right after he took command he noticed that none of the medics seemed to do much constructive work after about ten in the morning and had tried to dragoon them into afternoon work details. Williard had quickly put a stop to that. The next day, every single one of the troopers reporting for sick call had been put on bed rest for three days, forcing Major Hollis to use sergeants and second lieutenants to drive some of the tankers. Half of the first convoy had gotten conveniently lost as they passed through Saigon and hadn't returned until dark, the drivers pleasantly drunk and sexually satiated, fuel still undelivered. That was the last time Williard had any trouble with the Major. After that, he had been most cooperative and Hollis got his convoys out on time and in order. It wouldn't hurt to keep him buttered up, though, and an invitation to a jungle juice party thrown by the medics was always coveted.

"Major Hollis? Sure. I'll ask him to drop by," Harkness said. "You got it now, Sarge?"

"I got it," Williard said, taking his vacated seat. "See you later." It was a broad hint and Harkness got the hell away from the young male bodies and presently began examining a much more interesting physique.

"Next!" Williard called to the first trooper in the sick call line as he re-lit his cigar. "What's your problem?"

"I got a cough, Doc."

"Take off your shirt." Williard listened perfunctorily to the troopers lungs with his stethoscope, which now that Pinkerton was disposed of, he kept hung loosely around his neck." He heard light rales, typical of heavy smokers. He shined his otoscope light down the troopers throat. It was normal.

"Son, you need to quit smoking so much," Williard said,



blowing smoke from his cigar into the air. "Either that or make your money last til next payday. The army ain't got unlimited supplies of G.I. Gin."

"Just one bottle will do me."

Williard checked the chart, noted that the young hero hadn't been riding the sick call circuit, and filled out an Rx for a pint of the cough medicine. "Take this back to the pharmacy and don't come back for no more unless you're coughing up mucous. Next!"

"I got the clap," the next trooper said

"You probably got more than that if you stopped at the wrong truck wash." He wrote an order on another Rx form. "Take this back to the lab and get a smear. Bring the results back when Heavy gets finished with you."

"Heavy?"

"The lab tech with the microscope. You gotta be checked for syphilis, too."

"Oh, shit," the young man said, covering his groin. "My wife will kill me."

"That ain't my problem. Next!"

Another young trooper stepped forward. Williard, prepared for either another dose of clap or a request for cough medicine, was surprised.

"I've had a stroke, Doc! The whole side of my face is paralyzed!" Indeed, it looked as if he might have had a stroke. From the zygomatic arch, down to the lower chin, one side of the trooper's face hung slack. Drool dripped from the side of his mouth where he was unable to close it completely.

Williard ignored the injured face. He had the patient raise and lower his arm on the same side of his body, bend over and touch his toes. He sat him down and tapped with a percussion hammer just beneath his kneecap. The lower leg kicked upward just as it was supposed to.

"Awright," Williard said. "You ain't had no stroke. What you got is Bell's palsy."



"Am I going to die?"

"Not unless your tanker runs over a mine while you're driving in the convoy tomorrow. Bell's palsy is just a paralysis of some of your facial muscles. There ain't no cure for it, but it usually goes away in a month or two. Carry a handkerchief with you so you can wipe the drool off your face."

"Can't you give me something for it Doc?" The young trooper was certain, like most non-medical people, that somewhere in medicine's vast repertoire of drugs that there was a pill to cure his ails.

Williard considered. The poor private was so agitated that if he didn't prescribe something he was likely to run his tanker off a cliff simply from looking cross-eyed down at the slackness of one whole side of his face. Bell's Palsy was a poorly understood disease, and he was being perfectly truthful when he said there was no cure but that it usually went away eventually. There was nothing he could do, except perhaps get the kid's mind occupied. He gestured for the young man to come closer. The private leaned forward.

"I'm gonna tell you again, just be patient and it will probably go away. I'll give you some pills to take. I doubt they'll help, but I've seen this before and the best prescription I ever heard of is to eat lots of pussy."

"Eat pussy! Doc, I never done that before!" Realizing that he was talking loud enough to be overheard, the private lowered his voice. "How can eating pussy help me?"

"Why it's simple, son. Eating pussy exercises the jaw muscles and using the tongue like that helps to flex your cheek and lips. It stands to reason that ought to stimulate the nerves in your face. Trust me. Just eat lots of pussy the next few weeks and before you know it you'll be back to normal."

"If you say so Doc," the private said dubiously. "How about them pills?"

"Take two a half hour before you eat any pussy and two the next morning." Williard wrote out a prescription for penicillin tablets in arcane pharmaceutical language so that the bewildered private wouldn't know what they were. He was sure that he would take the tablets, and if he followed the rest of his advice, it might save him from having to treat a venereal disease of the mouth in the near future.



"Next!"

"Doc, I got circles all over my body."

"Circles? You mean rings, don't you?" Williard didn't even have to ask this trooper to disrobe to diagnose him. It had to be ringworm, and if the fellow had "circles" all over his body, it simply meant that he had either been ignoring the symptoms or wasn't showering often enough to have noticed the infection before it got to that stage.

"Let me show you."

"Never mind. Go back to the lab and let the tech do a scraping. You got a fungus." He wrote out the order for Heavy. Usually, he would have simply treated the infection without benefit of a lab test, but since he figured Heavy should still be relatively sober, what with Pinkerton's interruption this morning, he felt he might as well give him a little work. Back in Heavy's lab, which was perpetually coated with a liberal effluvium of red laterite dust from the nearby chopper landing zone, a scraping would be taken from the infected man, placed on a glass slide, then immersed in a solution of 10% potassium hydroxide and gently heated until all the skin cells dissolved. If a fungus were present, it would appear among the ghostly fragments of dissolved skin tissue as tangled parallel lines, looking much like a Los Angeles freeway interchange at peak traffic hours. Heavy always took two or three scrapings and put them on separate slides since he was prone to boil rather than heat them gently, depending upon how many beers he had rescued from his plasma cooler that morning.

"Next!"

Another clap.

"Next!"

Another clap.

"Next!"

"Doc, I can't shit. It's been a week now."

Williard glanced down at the man's medical record. Second complaint, same symptom. He slammed the record closed.

"I warned you, goddamit. You told me when we cleaned you



out last time you was going to leave that opium alone."

"I ain't been hitting, Doc. Just a little, maybe."

"A little my ass. You don't get stopped up from a little of that shit. It's a wonder you ain't drove your tanker into the ocean, much as you've been smoking. Awright. We're going to clean you out again, but you ain't getting off so easy this time. I'm calling your field first right now. He's going to go through your locker to make sure you ain't got no more of that stuff on hand, then you're going to be pounding stakes for the next month and pulling double guard duty every night until you got it worked out of your system, understand? Junkman! Get your lavage gloves and clean this sumbitch out again and don't be gentle about it, you hear?" It was too bad other soldiers using dope weren't like the Junkman, just staying high enough to forget their troubles and not overdoing it.

Junkman led the miscreant off while Williard picked up the phone and ground out the trooper's company headquarters. Shortly he was giving instructions to the field first, making certain that the opium smoking private lived to regret his excesses. Opium impeded the normal peristaltic movements of the bowels, letting feces back up into the large intestine and harden until it was impossible to pass.

"Yeah," Williard told the field first. "One more time and we'll nail the bastard with a drug test and send him to Long Binh jail. Make sure he knows that. We ain't going to fuck with digging shit out of him no more." Hard drugs were becoming more and more prevalent as the war wound on, and no one seemed to be doing much about them. A little pot was one thing, but this was ridiculous. If it keeps on, he thought, what was the army going to come to? It's the officers' fault, he thought. They are the ones ultimately responsible. If he ever got to be an officer--

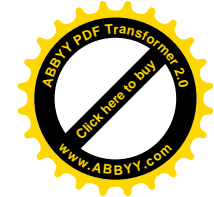
The First Sergeant interrupted his thoughts. "You got it Doc. By the time I finish with that young hero he won't even want a cigarette, let alone that other stuff."

Williard hung up the phone. "Next!"

Another clap.

Another clap.

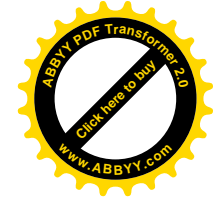
The morning wore on, compounded by having to take time to review Harkness' and Duarez's charts. It was almost noon before Williard was able to close the dispensary and begin to plan how many



people to invite to the incineration of the condemned steaks and jungle juice party that night. The mess sergeant, of course. Major Hollis. The two Docs. All three of the field firsts. The Sergeant-Major. The officer's club officer, the enlisted club officer and the real powers of the clubs, the sergeants in charge. He made a note while counting steaks against numbers that he would have words with the club officers, both enlisted and commissioned. That goddamned Ballentine's beer was going to have to go. Somewhere up the supply line, he knew one of them must be able to pass the word that deals were fine, but that horrible, hangover-inducing brew was going to lose the war by virtue of incapacitating the whole army if it kept coming into Vietnam at the present rate. Deals were fine, mostly, but the magnitude of that one had him wondering where it would all end.

After chow, Williard felt the hair above his ears, noticed it was getting a little close and decided to inspect the barbershop. In his capacity as acting veterinary officer, he had control over sanitation of the barbershops. His sanitation inspections consisted of plopping himself down in the barber's chair for a free haircut and massage, then collecting his once a week bundle of piasters from the Vietnamese proprietor, whom he suspected of manning mortars for the Viet Cong after leaving for work in the evening. He didn't worry about it, though. If the barber was as inaccurate with his mortar as he was with his scissors, there was little to worry about. Besides, if he gave as good a massage to his Viet Cong brethren as he did to him, they probably stayed so relaxed as to prohibit lifting mortar shells or tooling around through the surrounding mosquito infested jungle. A good massage might also get his mind off the increasing dullness of the daily routine in the dispensary. If that didn't, then surely the jungle juice party would. Soon, he was relaxing under the ministrations of the barber and letting his mind wander. He thought of his brother Jason, flying missions up north, risking his life every day while he played doctor to dirty dicks back in a safe area and his stateside dreams of glory and heroism faded into a haze of hookers and parties and sly manipulation of the system. Sometimes it was so much fun that he could almost forget a war was actually going on right around him; at other times, like now, he felt guilty that at the present rate he might finish his whole tour without ever seeing any real combat, while out in the jungle and up in the air men were fighting and dying every day. Maybe I should talk to Jason, see what he has to say about it, he thought. He made a tentative decision to do just that and it finally put his mind at ease.

After finishing his inspection of the barber shop, Williard went back to the hooch for his daily nap, which might last anywhere from an hour to all afternoon, depending on what he had planned for the evening. This nap lasted several hours. Preparing for a jungle juice



party and its aftermath was an art he had perfected through hard won experience. It included three solid meals and an afternoon's rest. Before the last meal of the day, he made certain he had a good supply of hangover remedy for the next morning, namely a pocketful of APC with codeine and some cold beer in the cooler. APC tablets were a compound of aspirin, phenacetin and caffeine, used for normal aches and pains and referred to by GI's and medics all over the world as "all purpose capsules". For severe pain, another version included codeine. Williard always kept these handy, never knowing when circumstances might dictate an excessive intake of alcohol such as he anticipated this coming evening. These special pills were also a good trade item, as he had found out, and Dum-Dum fixed the pharmacy books for him in return for being allowed frequent trips to wash the crackerboxes and see his hookers. Back in the states, Williard would never have thought of such a thing, but over here it just seemed like a normal concomitant to other, much greater irregularities. Anyway, he reasoned, the army had plenty and he never stinted a trooper in real need of the pills. He just hoped Colonel Pinkerton never got wind of the excess orders or he would surely be up the proverbial creek without the metaphorical paddle.

Chapter Six

When Sgt. Williard returned from evening chow, Dum-Dum was already busy concocting the jungle juice. For a party planned like the one tonight, he used a 30 gallon garbage can, scrupulously scoured and cleaned by mama-san, although truth be told, it was an exercise in futility. No bug known to man could live more than a few seconds in a garbage can full of Dum-Dum's brew. He claimed the recipe was somewhat similar to that used back in the hills to cut moonshine with on special occasions. It consisted of fifteen gallons of 95% grain alcohol, a couple of cases of beer to give it a few bubbles, whatever fruit juice was available, pineapple in this case, and his own special flavorings. He kept these mixed in with other bottles in the pharmacy. Williard was always afraid that one day he would confuse bottles and mix in ipecac or eugenol by mistake, but so far, he never had. As dense as Dum-Dum sometimes appeared, he did know how to stir up a good batch of jungle juice. This time, though, Williard shuddered as he watched him emptying Ballentine beer, can after can, into the other ingredients.

"Dum, is that fucking Ballentine's the only brand of beer you



got?"

"Sorry Sarge. The club says we have to use it up. Don't worry, I found another gallon or two of ethyl to cut the taste and some concentrated citric acid and raspberry syrup to sort of soak up what don't dissolve. That's in addition to the stuff I normally use. Also, I threw in a couple of quarts of Phenobarbital syrup too, so everyone will sleep it off nice and peaceful. You remember the last jungle juice party we had. Someone snuck some out to the guards and they kept us up all night shooting at monkeys."

Williard shuddered again. If the last brew had caused the guards to shoot at monkeys, this one might start a whole new war. He made a note to warn his men to sleep in the bunker after the party was over.

Dum-Dum finished stirring, then dropped in a tray of ice cubes gathered from the freezer compartment of the cooler where the condemned meat was stored.

"Is that all the ice you're going to use?"

"Don't worry, Sarge, after the first canteen cupful, no one will worry whether it's cool or not. In fact, they won't be worrying about much of anything. You flatlanders don't know how to handle this stuff."

Williard had no doubt of that. Sick call the next morning was liable to take on the aspects of a circus in hell. He patted his pocket to make sure the container of APC with codeine was still there. He felt sorry for anyone waking up the next morning without some.

"Is it ready?" Heavy asked as he came staggering into the tent. He had skipped evening chow and cleaned his blood cooler out of beer to make up for the morning deficit.

"Sure, have a taste," Dum-Dum said, dipping a canteen cup into the mixture.

Heavy took the cup and sipped. He smacked his lips. "That's great, Dum. You ought to go into business."

"I just do this for my friends," Dum-Dum said, voice innocent of any trace of sarcasm.

"I'm glad I ain't an enemy of yours," Williard said. "Here, lemme have a taste." He sipped. "Not bad, Dum. If you'd of had some



Coors instead of that shitty Ballentine it might be worth selling." He drained the rest of the canteen cup lest it dissolve from holding the jungle juice too long.

"Can I try it?" This came from Baby Blake, another of Williard's medical specialists. He was called Baby Blake because of his constant crying over the absence of mail from his wife. He claimed she was too sick to write most of the time. The other medics thought she was probably just off fucking every night. Williard was glad he wasn't married any longer. Wives were all right in peacetime, but when there was a war on, he thought the best thing a man could do was to get divorced and remarry when it was over. Wives just didn't understand what went on in a war zone, especially in the rear areas where temptations and sexual enticements were as prevalent as Hershey bars in a candy store. Besides, there was going to be a lot of divorces anyway before this war was over, so why not get it done sooner rather than later? He tried to think right off hand of a faithful husband he knew and came up with only two, but they had just arrived in Vietnam a few weeks ago so he couldn't properly count them.

Baby Blake didn't usually drink much. He dipped his canteen cup into the brew and took an incautiously big gulp. The color drained from his face. He coughed violently. "Jesus, Dum, don't you know we got to give shots tomorrow? Much of this and we'll be sticking ourselves just to be sure we brought our bodies along." Periodically, all the men from one company or another in nearby compounds were rounded up and herded through a line to have their inoculations brought up to date. None of the dispensary medics ever took their own shots, feeling, perhaps rightfully, that any bug biting them was certain to die horribly. Any biting them tonight certainly would.

"I forgot," Dum-Dum confessed.

"Never mind," Williard said. "We'll let Heavy give the shots. He never sobers up long enough to have a hangover."

"I reshent that," Heavy said. "I was sober once."

"The day you were born, maybe," Junkman said, joining the gang. For once, he wasn't spaced out. He had learned the hard way not to mix pot and jungle juice, and he loved jungle juice. It gave him an interesting interval between weeks long highs. The only problem was that when he came down long enough to sample alcohol rather than pot, he became paranoid about snipers. He already had his flak jacket on.



"You sleeping in the bunker tonight, Junk?" Heavy asked, knowing that he would. Heavy never worried about snipers. The reason for that was by the time night fell and the usual erratic rounds came whizzing into the compound he was already so drunk that he never heard them. Some mornings he was convinced that there was no such thing as snipers, especially if they had been lax lately. Then he had to be shown bullet holes in bunkers to convince him.

"Them snipers probably won't let us sleep at all," Junkman said, looking out toward the surrounding forest. "You wait, one of these days we're going to catch it right in the ass."

"Heavy ain't got no ass, it's all bone," Baby Blake remarked.

"I reshent that," Heavy said.

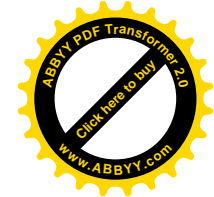
"Who reshents, er, resents what?" Captain Harkness said. He had spent all afternoon tapping his little brown housemaid, using interludes to finish a letter to his wife. Just before joining the other medics he had sealed the missive along with the mortar fragment he had dug out of the bunker the previous day, just to prove to Gertrude how close he came to death each day and how much he was in need of his upcoming rest and recreation in Bangkok. R & R, sometimes referred to as I & I, intoxication and intercourse, was the right of every person in Vietnam to take a five day leave to various points on the globe. Most requests were for Hong Kong, Australia, Thailand or other places where sex and booze flowed freely. Harkness' wife had written him numerous imploring letters about meeting him in Hawaii, but so far, he had resisted the proposal. He was determined to go to Thailand, where one of his air force buddies had told him that the girls were even younger and prettier than Junie and were professionals rather than amateurs. He could hardly wait.

"Nobody here reshents anything," Heavy said. "Have some jungle juice, Doc." He handed over his canteen cup.

Harkness tilted it to his mouth but there was nothing inside. Heavy had already drained it. "Thanks, Heavy. You're all heart." He dipped the cup into the jungle juice, sipped and gagged. "Goddamn, Dum, this is the worst fucking stuff I ever tasted."

"Try some more," Dum-Dum advised.

Harkness sipped again. A volcano rumbled somewhere down inside his gut, spreading hot lava through his body. He drank again and the volcano quieted down, content to merely spew rocks and



ashes for the time being.

"Good, ain't it?" Dum-Dum said, fishing for a compliment.

"Good enough for government work," Harkness agreed, taking a third sip. Once the pyloric sphincter, that circular band of alcohol-sensitive muscle tissue at the bottom of the stomach, closed up shop for the evening and refused to pass the jungle juice on to the lower intestines, it did sit well--for the time being, at least.

"What's good enough?" Major Hollis, the compound commander asked as he arrived.

"Thish," Heavy said, producing another empty canteen cup and handing it to the major.

"I don't understand," Major Hollis said, a not unusual utterance in the presence of any one of the medics. He eyed the empty cup. No telling what the crazy bastards were up to this time. They obviously didn't belong to the same army he had accepted a commission in these many years ago, but he had to admit that sometimes he was a little envious of them. They operated like no medics he ever knew back in the world, nor any others for that matter, but he was afraid to complain. On those rare occasions when he had to leave the compound he wasn't at all adverse to getting his ashes hauled, and he knew that in this area there was probably a better than fifty-fifty chance of contacting something he had no intention of bringing home to his wife. Aggravate the medics and he might wind up getting distilled water shot into his butt rather than a curative dose of penicillin. After that one abortive attempt at discipline, he had learned his lesson well: don't jack around with the medics, especially medical sergeant James Williard. He knew who really ran the dispensary.

"Let me help you, Major," Sgt. Williard said, taking his cup. He dipped it into the garbage can and brought it out, brimming full. "Careful, now. Take small swallows first."

Major Hollis took the barest bit of the jungle juice into his mouth, swished it around, then swallowed hastily lest it burn his teeth loose from his gums. He tried vainly to keep a straight face, but Williard caught his outraged expression as the jungle juice attacked his epiglottis, which fought briefly then let it pass on down his gullet.

"God, I've never tasted anything like that in my life!" Hollis exclaimed.



Dum-Dum beamed proudly. "It's my own recipe, sir. That's how we do it in West Virginia."

"It's no wonder West Virginia became a separate state," Hollis said, feeling the concoction begin to attack the mucosa of his stomach. The battle raged briefly, then peace was declared. The stomach mucosa has an acidity approaching that of sulfuric acid and was barely a match for this batch of jungle juice.

"I'm from West Virginia," Lieutenant Borland, the mess officer said as he came on the scene, carefully averting his eyes from the US army label on the pile of steaks Sgt. Williard was unwrapping. Borland looked around to see if Sgt. Pancake, commonly called Pancake, had arrived yet with some condemned potatoes Sgt. Williard had down checked that day. "Where's Pancake?"

"He told me he had to run by the club first and pick up a few cases of Ballentines in case we ran out of jungle juice," Williard said. "Don't worry, he'll be here soon. He has to sign off on this condemned meat, too."

"You're from West Virginia?" Dum-Dum broke in. "Here, sir. Show these flatlanders how we handle happy juice back home." He passed over a brimming canteen cup.

Lt. Borland, from West-by-God Virginia took the challenge. He tilted the cup and chugalugged the whole thing, adam's apple bobbing like a short stringed yoyo as he poured it down.

"Gahhh," he gasped as the full import of his daring hit home. The jungle juice, trapped between ravaged epiglottis and implacable pyloric sphincter gurgled and bubbled as it fought with stomach mucosa. His face turned a fiery red and he sat down abruptly, eyes crossed.

"See?" Dum-Dum said proudly. "We know how to handle this stuff."

Williard began placing steaks on the food incinerator, which was still in masquerade as a barbecue pit. "Where's Tex?"

"Here I am, Sarge." Tex was a lean young corporal of medium height who ran the dispensary's central supply section. He claimed to be a crack shot with a pistol and had tried demonstrating this one night by firing three clips from his .45 at rifle flashes from a sniper. As he was atop the medical bunker when this occurred, the shots had passed uncomfortably close over the heads of the perimeter guards.



Since the dispensary bunker was located in the center of the compound, this caused the guards to think the Viet Cong had broken through the wire. They had fired back at him enthusiastically, though with no more accuracy than the sniper demonstrated. Williard retaliated by confiscating the remainder of Tex's ammunition. It was bad enough being sniped at by the Viet Cong without having the perimeter guards getting in on the act. He consoled Tex by letting him come along as a security guard whenever he got tired of treating clap and decided to run a medcap mission to Sonh Bayh, the nearby village that supplied all the mama-sans, hookers, shit burners and other service personnel hired from the local population.

"Hi Tex," Williard said. "Get your sauce going, I'm ready to fire up the grill, I mean this here incinerator."

Tex always supplied the sauce to cook the meat. Like Dum-Dum's jungle juice, it was a potion of his own devising. He made it strong enough to half dissolve tough army steaks while they were cooking and make them more or less palatable. Actually, it was a very good sauce and produced tasty steaks but he got little thanks for his efforts. On the nights when condemned meat was incinerated there was always some jungle juice available and it numbed taste buds as effectively as a shot of Novocain from a dentist.

Pancake arrived with the potatoes, having stopped off at the club to adjust his attitude before tackling Dum-Dum's jungle juice. The potatoes were already partially tenderized from bouncing around in back of the mess jeep.

"Hey, Pancake. Glad to see you could make it. You got the potatoes?" Williard said.

"In the jeep," Pancake told him, heading for the bubbling garbage can.

Williard fancied himself as a chef, which meant that he mostly supervised while other troops did the work. He directed the potatoes to be wrapped in foil and tossed into the incinerator, discarding Dum-Dum's suggestion that they be sprinkled with jungle juice first to flavor them up a bit. Williard might have gone along with the idea except for the possibility that the fumes from the jungle juice might dissolve the tinfoil and escape, catch fire and blow up the grill.

While the condemned steaks and potatoes were being incinerated, Williard made certain that all the paperwork got done while the responsible parties were still able to sign their names. As they cooked, other invited parties began drifting into the area. The



field firsts, a few other officers, a dozen or two enlisted men he had various dealings with and the sergeant major of the tanker battalion.

Sgt. Major Crock was referred to behind his back as "Crock of Shit," a natural epithet which lower grade enlisted men couldn't resist. Williard didn't particularly care for him. He was too rigidly bound by regulations for him to feel entirely comfortable around him, but had thought it politic to extend an invitation.

Sgt. Major Crock stayed on the periphery of the increasingly rowdy party as the evening progressed. He accepted a cup of jungle juice, sniffed cautiously at it, and then pretended to drink while surreptitiously pouring it into Short Round's water bowl when no one was looking. Short Round was the dispensary's mascot, a medium sized dog with black and tan spots the medics had adopted. Short Round trusted his masters implicitly, believing in his doggy mind that he had died and gone to heaven rather than been adopted. He had never eaten so well or so much in the village of Sonh Bayh. He lapped up the Sgt. Major's discarded jungle juice as it was poured into his bowl. His tail stiffened and the hair on his body suddenly stood up and quivered as if it were trying to escape from his skin. By the time he decided his water had somehow changed complexion, his nose and tongue were both numb and it began to taste pretty good.

Dum-Dum brought out his guitar, which he played enthusiastically but with little sense of rhythm, but by this time everyone was on their second or third cup of jungle juice and the guitar could just as well have been a banshee wailing for all anyone noticed. Junkman produced a harmonica and added to the discordance, playing a completely different tune. The men began singing an old army lament.

<BLOCKQUOTE>

The coffee in the army,

They say is mighty fine.

It's good for cuts and bruises,

But tastes like iodine.

</BLOCKQUOTE>

Then the chorus kicked in.

<BLOCKQUOTE>



*Gee mom, I wanta go,
But they won't let me go,
Gee mom, I wanta go home.*

</BLOCKQUOTE>

And another verse.

<BLOCKQUOTE>

*The food in the army,
They say is mighty fine,
But every now and then,
It kills a friend of mine.*

</BLOCKQUOTE>

Another chorus.

**Tex began flipping steaks off the grill into a pan and pulling
singd potatoes from the coals. He began singing.**

<BLOCKQUOTE>

*The beer in the army,
They say is mighty fine,
You never can get drunk,
You're pissing all the time.*

</BLOCKQUOTE>

Mop came in.

<BLOCKQUOTE>

*The women in the army,
They say are mighty fine.*



But they give a dose of clap,

With every valentine.

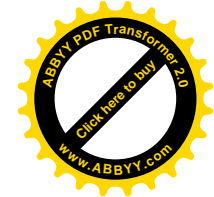
</BLOCKQUOTE>

Sgt. Major Crock poured another cup of jungle juice into Short Round's water bowl. He hung back when the steaks were distributed, mentally noting how the officers, NCOs and enlisted men were consorting with each other. Lt. Borland, having regained his feet momentarily, was trying to help Dum-Dum play his guitar, which did nothing to improve the music. Major Hollis, now on his fourth cup of jungle juice, had his arm around the shoulders of Sgt. Williard, telling him in slurred words what a fine dispensary he ran. Pancake, the mess sergeant, was busy pouring jungle juice into Tex, regaling him for the recipe that made the steaks so tender. Tex promised to give him a sample of his sauce the first thing next morning if he could keep Dum-Dum from using what was left to spice up the remains of his jungle juice. Dum-Dum had suddenly decided that Tex's barbecue sauce might add a little more kick to the remaining brew if he mixed it with some more Ballentine and the last quart of grain alcohol he had on hand. While Pancake was still pleading his cause, Dum-Dum got loose from Williard's restraining hands and dumped all the new ingredients into the garbage can. The jungle juice gurgled and suddenly took on the flavor of jalapeño peppers grown in an alcohol vat.

Major Hollis, normally the epitome of propriety, guzzled another cup of the reinforced brew. His tongue shot out of his mouth like a lizard looking for an ice cube. He began staggering in a circle around the periphery of the group, hunting out those of his tanker drivers who had been invited to the party. He shook each one's hand whenever he could focus his blurred vision on the right appendage. Most of the men seemed to have grown four and sometimes six arms. Whenever he managed to get a grip on one, he shook it vigorously. "I couldn't run thish place without yoush men," he said over and over. By this time, his cap was askew, his fatigues were dripping with spilled jungle juice and there was a damp line down one leg where he had failed to aim properly while taking a piss.

Sgt. Major Crock looked on disgustedly at the officers and enlisted men consorting together. He looked at Sgt. Williard in particular, the instigator, who was right in the thick of things. He shook his head and marched away.

Williard was well into his cups by this time. He never missed



Sgt. Major Crock when he left the party, being busy at the time regaling Captains Harkness and Duarez on his theories for the treatment of Bell's palsy. Harkness agreed that the theory of eating pussy to cure the facial paralysis caused by the disease had merit, being of the opinion that even if the treatment didn't cure anything, it would certainly make the ailment easier to live with. Duarez disagreed. He went into a long discourse about how he would have treated the malady himself if Williard had allowed it, but no one was listening to him.

Pancake, disgusted at not obtaining a sample of Tex's barbecue sauce, quit pouring jungle juice down the Texan's throat and began hurriedly dipping his cup into the dregs of still remaining in the garbage can, trying to catch back up. Even through his alcoholic haze, he felt his mouth beginning to burn from the barbecue sauce Dum-Dum had added to the juice. He stumbled off to try to find a drink of water somewhere else, knowing that the medics never drank such a pale parody of their normal liquids. He fell into a drainage ditch and landed on Heavy's recumbent body. Heavy had long since passed out where he had tripped into the same ditch and had been unable to get up. Short Round, instinctively heading for real water instead of the strange liquid in his water bowl, had wandered that way and passed out on top of Heavy. Pancake fell on top of their sprawled bodies and immediately passed out, too, but not before waking the dog.

Short Round yelped and sprang to life. He immediately noticed that there were three moons in the sky and began howling at each of them in turn, spooking the perimeter guards. They began firing into the jungle, except for a couple that had left the jungle juice party for guard duty. Those two began shooting in the direction of Short Round's howling, being certain that the Viet Cong had broken through and were wracking havoc in that vicinity. The rounds passed directly over the dispensary bunker and punctured several oil tankers a hundred yards beyond, killing them for a few days, which would leave the air force short of fuel.

Junkman heard the shots and dived into the bunker, trying to buckle his helmet at the same time. It flew loose from his head and made a direct hit on Tex's skull, which would have certainly knocked him out had he not already been laying unconscious from all the jungle juice Pancake had forced down his throat while trying to steal his barbecue recipe.

"Snipers!" One of the enlisted tanker drivers said. "I gotta get my rifle!" He began to run and tripped over Lt. Borman's prone body, where he had fallen, still trying to the last to uphold West-by-God Virginia's reputation for alcoholic acumen. He crashed into Dum-



Dum's guitar and was out for the night. Dum-Dum, still upholding West Virginia's reputation, picked up the instrument and began playing "Yankee Doodle," two strings short.

"Play 'Dixie', goddamnit," Tex said, the discordant twangs rousing him from his sleep.

Dum-Dum ignored him and went into 'John Brown's Body' just as a third string broke. A tracer passed overhead and he immediately began singing about a rocket's red glare, mixing the lyrics with a lament concerning unfaithful women and pickup trucks.

Major Hollis, by this time unable to navigate upright but still retaining vestiges of responsibility, began crawling toward the emergency phone in the bunker. He made it, just barely, but knocked the phone off the cradle. He was still searching for it in the darkened bunker when his pyloric sphincter finally admitted defeat and passed his stomach's load of jungle juice on down into his small intestine, where, unimpeded by masticated meat, it was immediately absorbed. The Phenobarbital syrup Dum-Dum had added to the brew kicked in and he went peacefully to sleep.

Sgt. Williard wavered unsteadily in the middle of his disintegrating jungle juice party, sloshing canteen cup in hand. A vague notion came into his mind that perhaps he ought to get the few persons still able to stand upright under cover from the occasional bullet whizzing overhead but the last quart of alcohol added to the jungle juice had just about burned out any ambition. He retained just enough sense to pull the vial of APC with codeine from his pocket and pop three of the pills into his mouth. "Prophylactic medicine is the best medicine," he told himself, slowly folding down onto a sandbag. He sat and watched as the last of the upright figures, one by one, fell to the ground, not from enemy fire by any means, since no one was hit that night, but from the accumulation of jungle juice in their bodies. "Candy asses," he said. He got to his feet and managed to make it back to the hooch, walking over recumbent bodies. Dum-Dum's guitar gave one last discordant twang as he broke the last string on it and keeled over in a slump.

Short Round decided that none of the three moons were going to come down and fight. He stopped his howling and began snapping at fluttering bats feeding on mosquitoes. That made his head hurt. He lay down and went to sleep. The perimeter guards, short on ammunition and no longer hearing his wailing, stopped shooting. One last trooper at the dispensary still wavered upright. He bent over the garbage can and stuck his head down inside it, searching the bottom of it for one last drink. The fumes overwhelmed him. He



collapsed into the can like a leaking balloon. It tipped over, taking him down with it, leaving his head inside and feet sticking out. They twitched once or twice in the moonlight then were still. Williard's party was over. Only the aftermath remained.

Chapter Seven

Sgt. Williard woke to the smell of burning shit. The odor roiled his stomach. He tasted his tongue and suddenly suspected that all the shit wasn't being burned. Some of it seemed to be residing in his mouth.

All over Vietnam, bodily functions were relieved in one of two ways. Urine was disposed of where engineers dug a deep hole in the ground then filled it with lime and gravel. Above the hole they erected a square, waist high rectangle of four upright wooden posts surrounded by fly screens. The men pissed into the screen, allowing urine to pass through and drip into the hole where it then drained through the lime and into the gravel. The lime killed most of the smell and the fly screens prevented anxious insects from entry. Their other needs were seen to by structures resembling country outhouses, but the seating holes were backed up by cut off oil drums residing immediately beneath the openings. Each morning, soon after the compound gates were opened, the shit burners came around. These were local Vietnamese who raised a flap in the rear of the outhouses, removed the feces-filled oil drums and replaced them with clean containers. They took the used ones a short distance away, poured diesel fuel into them and set the contents on fire. Before leaving that evening, they emptied the cooled ashes and made them ready to replace filled containers the next morning.

Williard knew he had overslept by the smell from the burning barrels. Normally, the smell wafted over the compound just in time to mingle with the aroma of morning chow and just before he normally started sick call. He got slowly to his feet, felt of his head to make sure it was still attached, then looked at his watch. There was just enough time to hit the chow line, but there was no way he and Heavy could make their usual morning run. It was just as well. Heavy was just dragging in, having been spotted in the drainage ditch and awakened by one of the perimeter guards coming off duty. Pancake had apparently come to his senses sometime during the night and made it back to the mess tent on his own.



"Let's go eat," Williard said, wondering if his mind was at ease yet.

"Gahh," Heavy answered. He clawed at his head as if it were filled with hornets trying to sting their way out.

"Here, take some of these," Williard said, producing his cache of codeine laced APCs. He shook a handful out for Heavy, not bothering to count. The way he looked, numbers weren't important.

"Thanks Sarge," Heavy rasped around a tongue grown to twice normal size from the dragon potty attached to it. He gulped the pills down with a drink of water, an unusual liquid for him to be consuming. He couldn't bear to think of alcohol on his stomach just yet, a rousing testament to the potency of Dum-Dum's jungle juice recipe.

Williard took a couple more pills himself. He had a headache, though nothing like what Heavy appeared to be suffering from. The pills he had taken the night before had taken the edge off what would normally have been a record skull crusher. If he had his way, first sergeants would be authorized to hand out codeine to every hangover victim first thing in the morning, just as they did prophylaxis kits the night before they left. It didn't make sense to him that the army issued rubbers to prevent venereal disease but considered his own sovereign hangover remedy a narcotic, not to be given out except on a doctor's prescription. There were still other ingredients lacking, though. As soon as he got to the dispensary, he would load up on some B vitamins and if there was time enough, take a few sniffs of 50% oxygen from the cubicle where emergency operations were done. In the meantime, he hoped Heavy would live through the day.

"Have you seen Short Round this morning?" Williard asked as they headed for the mess tent.

"How would I know? My eyes won't track more than two feet in front of me yet. Why?"

"I thought I heard him howling last night before all the shooting started."

"Shooting? What shooting?"

"We took a little sniper fire last night, I think," Williard said, trying to sort out his fuzzed memories of the last hour or two of the party.



"I sure would like to hear some of them snipers one of these days," Heavy said. "You guys are always talking about snipers but I never hear any shooting."

"If you'd try to keep from passing out before dark once in a while you would."

"Maybe I will one day. I don't even feel like I been in a war yet. Hey, there's Short Round. I wonder where he's been?"

Normally, Short Round accompanied Williard and Heavy on their morning run, and then followed them to chow for his breakfast of scraps from their plates. The dog was in his usual place in front of the mess tent, but he was not standing and wagging his tail as he usually did. Instead, he was stretched out on his stomach, hind legs splayed. He was pawing at his head with his front paws as if trying to rake his head from his body and giving out little whoofs halfway between a bark and a moan.

"What's wrong, boy?" Heavy asked, bending over to pet their mascot, then straightening back up with a jerk. Bending over made his brain feel like a squashed cantaloupe, or more accurately, a cantaloupe in the act of being squashed. "Gawd! I ain't never going to touch that stuff again."

Williard ignored Heavy's promise. He had heard that one before, and it lasted exactly as long as the interval until the next jungle juice party. Williard bent over and rubbed Short Round's ears, causing him to yelp painfully and roll over on his back. He immediately covered his eyes with his forepaws to block off rays from the morning sun. "Damn, if I didn't know better, I'd say this here dog has a hangover, too."

"If he drank any of that devil's brew last night, he's got exactly what he deserves," Heavy said.

"Some dirty bastard must have set a canteen cup or something down by him last night. You know how he'll eat or drink anything we give him. You got any of those pills left I gave you?"

"Yeah, a couple, but I saved them to take with my first beer."

"I'll get some more for you. Hand 'em over."

Heavy reluctantly relinquished the two pills. Williard stooped and dropped them into Short Round's open mouth then held his



muzzle closed until he swallowed. "There. Two of them ought to do for a dog his weight. Any sonofabitch what would feed a poor dumb dog jungle juice ought to be shot."

"If we kept weapons in the dispensary, I'd shoot Dum-Dum this morning just as soon as he showed his face."

"You'll live. Come on let's eat."

Pancake was supervising his cooks on the mess line by holding his head in one trembling hand and a cup of coffee in the other. Occasionally he looked up, sipped at his coffee, groaned, then buried his head in his hand again.

"Hey, Pancake, bet I feel worse than you do," Heavy called, holding his plate out for scrambled eggs. Actually, the codeine was beginning to kick in and he was debating internally over how many beers he could drink and still function that afternoon when they had to drive over to the next compound and give shots.

Pancake raised his bloodshot eyes and haggard face as evidence contrary to Heavy's remark, not trusting himself to answer.

"Can't take it, huh?" Heavy laughed. The handful of pills with the codeine in them was beginning to overlay his hangover with a pleasant high.

"Shut up, Heavy. Let the man suffer in peace." Williard held out his tray over the steam table for an extra helping of S.O.S. to go with his eggs. The heavy creamed beef always helped to settle his innards after the ravaging they took from jungle juice.

With some breakfast in his stomach and some codeine in his bloodstream, Williard left the mess tent, carrying a couple of bacon strips in a napkin. Short Round was waiting, back on his feet, tail wagging feebly. Williard fed him the bacon. He was beginning to feel almost normal, that is, until he saw the sick call line. That made his head hurt again. It was longer than usual by half, and he wondered how much of the jungle juice from the previous night had found it's way to other environs of the compound. Right in front of the line was Major Hollis and Lt. Borland. Major Hollis had heard rumors that no matter how drunk the medics got the night before, they were always remarkably functional the next morning. He had no idea that the medics were prone to popping APCs with codeine the morning after like Bears lapping honey. All he really knew was that if he didn't get something to relieve his aching head and churning stomach soon he was prepared to fall on his sidearm and end the misery.



Williard took pity on the major. After all, he was responsible for seeing to the oil tankers that delivered fuel to his brother's planes, although as many Jason had lost lately, he felt like the government would come out better just letting him run out. Williard seated himself behind his desk and pulled out the special drawer where he kept his own pharmacopoeia and selected a variety of remedies. APC with Codeine. B vitamins. Antacid tablets. A couple of Phenobarbitals.

He didn't bother having the Major's records pulled, knowing that Hollis would appreciate not having a possibly detrimental entry made in it. Instead he extended his sympathy.

"Major Hollis, sir, I can tell just by looking at you that you got a terrible migraine headache. Them migraines are bad news. They also make your stomach upset and your hands tremble."

"Right, Sarge. This is the worst migraine I ever had," Hollis agreed, quickly picking up on the circumlocution.

"I don't doubt it," Williard said, handing over a handful of pills. "Take all these with water except these two. Chew them, then get Pancake to give you some orange juice. I'll give you a prescription for something to add to it." He wrote out an order in pharmaceutical script, using the abbreviation for ethyl alcohol, ROH. "Take this back to the pharmacy and he'll fix you right up." He knew Dum-Dum always kept a little reserve alcohol on hand unless Heavy had already robbed him of it. "Don't worry, in about an hour or so that migraine will be gone."

Major Hollis hoped he could last that long. His convoys were already becoming disorganized without him there to coordinate the logistics.

After taking care of Lt. Borland in the same fashion, Williard had the records of the rest of the men pulled, checking first before treating them whether they had a propensity to ride the sick list. Those who did got no sympathy, only a prescription for ASA, the abbreviation for simple aspirin, and were told to get back to work. Others he treated judiciously with smaller amounts of his own sovereign remedies and allowed them an hour's rest before driving.

Hangovers dispensed with, Williard spent the rest of the morning dealing with the usual cases of clap and syphilis and venereal warts and skin diseases and the occasional cough and cold and back pain.



While he was picking and choosing which troopers to cure from the ravages of Dum-Dum's jungle juice and which to let suffer, Sgt. Major Crock was driving through the just opened gate and heading for the medical brigade headquarters to talk to Colonel Pinkerton. Sgt. Crock had arrived in country only a few weeks earlier, his first combat tour. He had made his rank in Germany during the fifties by dint of cozying up to a regulation sharp general, eventually becoming his aide, where he was able to finagle assignments which kept him out of the fighting in Korea. His entire career had been with armored units and he looked down on simple infantrymen with contempt, and logistics troops with disdain little short of a Mississippi farm owner for his sharecroppers. He believed in army regulations, every one of them, even those that made no sense to anyone with an I.Q. over 40. He had yet to learn that in a combat zone regulations were sometimes twisted beyond recognition, or in many cases simply ignored as unworkable. Last night he had seen fraternization between officers and enlisted men on a scale unheard of since Ug, the cave general allowed mug, the cave private to share his mate, and this morning he intended to put a stop to it, even though he had already been warned by a couple of NCO's that challenging Sgt. Williard's domain sometimes resulted in a sudden transfer to a line company where snipers were the least of the dangers. He wasn't worried, though. After surviving the wild firing of the night before, he considered himself a blooded combat veteran.

Ordinarily, Sgt. Major Crock would have taken the matter to his own commander, but unfortunately, Major Hollis was one of the miscreants. No, the best thing was to bring this fraternization scandal directly to the attention of Sgt. Williard's own twice removed commander, Colonel Pinkerton, and surely, he would take action.

Colonel Pinkerton's curiosity was aroused when he heard that the sergeant major of the tanker compound wanted to see him. He hurried through checking the oil levels and radiator fluid of brigade headquarters vehicles, stuffed his oil rag back into its holster and marched into his office.

"Good morning, sir," Sgt. Major Crock said, saluting smartly.

"Good morning, Sgt. Major. What can I do for you?"

"Sir, it is my duty to report that one of your medical units seems to be a little out of hand. Last night I observed some blatant social mixing of your officers and enlisted men, contrary to regulations. The NCOIC, the non commissioned officer in charge of your unit, Sgt. Williard, appeared to be the instigator of this event. I



regret to say that there appeared to be some of my own officers and men fraternizing as well."

"Wait, wait, Sergeant Major. Surely what you really mean is that you observed some enlisted men fraternizing with officers, not the other way around."

Sgt. Crock suddenly looked as if he really were full of shit. This wasn't the way he thought the interview would go. "Well--"

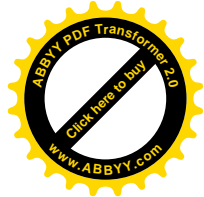
"Right," Colonel Pinkerton said. He wasn't about to allow any of his own officers to be caught up in those allegations, even if they had bent a little under the trials of seeing that their men kept their vehicles properly maintained in a war zone. It would reflect adversely on him and the whole army officer corps if any such thing were admitted. That was the trouble with enlisted men; they just couldn't see the big picture.

"Well, I guess that might have been the case," Sgt. Major Crock said, a bitter taste in his mouth. Apparently, this colonel was also under the sway of Sgt. Williard. How on earth could such a thing be? He needn't have worried. Colonel Pinkerton was already wondering how he could use this revelation against the unruly Sgt. Williard. He just wasn't going to have his officers implicated in the proceedings. They were almost certainly innocent, anyway.

"Fine, Sergeant," Colonel Pinkerton said, now that he had Sgt. Major Crock straightened out. "I appreciate you bringing this matter to my attention, and I'll certainly take some action if I ever get the goods--I mean, if Sgt. Williard was at fault in this matter. However, I understand from reports that you had some action over there last night. Perhaps the officers and men were simply thrown together a little too closely while under enemy fire." That was the worst scenario Pinkerton could imagine in his military mind, having never attended a jungle juice party. Williard was a separate matter, though. Fraternizing!

"Perhaps that is what happened," Sgt. Major Crock said glumly. Now what?

"Don't feel too bad at misinterpreting what went on during combat, Sergeant. We here in the war zone often do that, but like I said, I appreciate you bringing this to my attention. Perhaps you would be willing to keep an eye on this Sgt. Williard for me. He strikes me as not being really NCO material, even though he is a Sgt. First Class. I'd love to get something on him, um, that is, I think he bears watching, especially the way he maintains his vehicles."



Vehicles? What was he talking about? What did vehicles have to do with fraternization? "I'll be glad to watch him for the colonel, sir. After all, NCO's are the back bone of the army." Sgt. Major Crock said, perking up again, getting the hint that Williard was already under a cloud of some sort, even though he didn't understand the reference to vehicles.

"They certainly are the backbone," Colonel Pinkerton agreed, thinking to himself they were more like the coccyx, the tailbone, of the army, especially Sgt. First Class James Williard.

"Thank you sir," Crock said.

"Not at all, Sergeant Major. Just let me know of any other irregularities you see Sgt. Williard involved in. Would you like me to check the oil in your jeep before you go?"

"Uh, I checked it right after I got here, Colonel. I'm sure it's full," Crock said with a puzzled look on his face.

"Be certain, Sergeant. This man's army runs on wheels, you know. You can't pay too much attention to your vehicles."

Colonel Pinkerton looked longingly out of his window as the sergeant major drove away. I bet it's short on oil, he thought, touching his oil rag holster. He pulled a stack of maintenance logs from his in basket and began reviewing them, alert for the smallest discrepancy. When he was finished, he made a few notes in a private file he had decided to begin keeping whenever Sgt. Williard's name came up. The next time he confronted him he intended to have all his ducks in a row.

Chapter Eight

"Wrap it up and let's go get some chow," Williard said, as he was finishing with his last patient, a private complaining of back pain. Williard had noted that he was a draftee and took extra precautions with his examination. Draftees were more likely to write their Congressmen than enlistees. He made certain by touch and feel and probing that it was simply a mild lower back sprain rather than a dislocated disk. He prescribed a jogging regime such as he himself



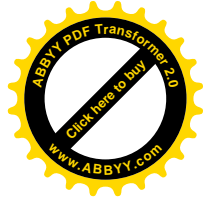
followed, then returned the young hero back to duty. He wouldn't be coming back soon unless something was really wrong with him.

It had been a long morning, what with all the troops there who had attended the jungle juice party, and the day wasn't over yet. There were still shots to give next door. In the nature of things, it was far easier for a few medics to drive there than for a whole company to be driven to the dispensary, but he still resented having to leave the comforting surroundings of the dispensary and dispense medicine somewhere else. One of these days, he thought, I'm going to have to figure a way to get out of this shit. He didn't like having so many of the medics away from the compound at the same time, especially when the two he usually had to leave behind were Heavy and Junkman. So far though, he hadn't been able to come up with an alternate solution. The nearby compound commanders simply couldn't spare the time and vehicles to drive all their men over.

By this time, Heavy was not only too drunk to drive, he was too drunk to even stand up, having partaken too frequently of hair of the dog. Williard helped him to his bunk and hoped no serious lab work would be needed that afternoon. Likely, it wouldn't. Lab tests were nice, but Williard felt himself capable of dealing with most illnesses he might encounter in the young troopers without them. Mostly, he used lab tests as a means of keeping Heavy busy enough to stay out of the blood cooler where he kept his beer until sick call was over. Even on the rare occasion when a sniper or stray mortar round wounded one of the tanker drivers badly enough to require a transfusion until he could be taken to one of the evac or field hospitals, there wasn't much Heavy was required to do. Whole blood was used so rarely here that only O type, the universal donor blood, was kept on hand. In field hospitals, blood for transfusions was carefully crossmatched with a blood sample from prospective recipients, but at isolated compounds such as this one, Heavy simply mixed a drop of donor and recipient blood together on a slide. If the mixture didn't crack the slide, it was assumed to be safe to give. When the blood became too old to use on patients, Heavy used it to make up blood agar plates to culture bacteria on.

After chow, Williard drove off with all the medics except Heavy and the Junkman, whom he left in charge in case of an emergency. He hoped none would occur. Neither of the men was in shape to handle anything more complicated than a stubbed toe. Junkman had used his own hangover cure. By noon, he was so spaced out that he could barely stand without weaving back and forth as though blowing in a wind. He was sober, though, if that meant anything.

The company that was to receive shots was already lined up and



ready. Williard quickly organized his medics. Mop stamped medical records and individual shot records as each trooper went through the line. Dum-Dum, Specialist Sanders, usually called Sandy or Sandman because of his perpetually half-closed lids, and acting sergeant Lifer Long gave the shots. Acting sergeant Long was called Lifer Long because he had just re-enlisted for four more years in the army. It had taken him only three weeks to dispose of his re-enlistment bonus, being a poor gambler and overly generous to a couple of Hookers he kept in style in Binh Hoa. Williard had offered to have orders cut making all of his senior medical specialists acting NCO's in order to give them a little more prestige, but only Long had accepted. The rest of them didn't want to go through the bother of paying mama-san to change the specialist insignia on their fatigues to sergeant stripes, then have to reverse the process when they rotated back to the world. Orders to be an acting sergeant were only good for the company a trooper was assigned to at the moment. Long had accepted the challenge right after he re-enlisted and was quick to point out to the others that when it came to a choice between a specialist and a sergeant of equal rank, the sergeant was always in charge. That was a dubious honor, so far as Junkman, Baby Blake and the Sandman were concerned. They didn't want any responsibility anyway. Heavy might have accepted sergeant's stripes in order to be more like Sgt. Williard, his idol, but he didn't want to spend any of his beer funds to buy them and have them attached. He had a recurring horror of running out of money to buy beer before the next payday.

Disposable syringes and needles had finally arrived in Vietnam the last month, which relieved the medics from having to clean and sterilize syringes and resharpen needles. The troopers getting the shots didn't know that, though. Sandman, who looked as if he were giving shots with his eyes closed anyway, played on the universal fear of dull needles by first giving the shot to a trooper, then flinging the syringe, with needle still attached, at an upright two by four plank he had brought along. Most of the time, he managed to stick the needle into the plank, but it almost always bent and left the syringe hanging at an odd angle. Those that bounced bent even worse and fell into a metal bucket beneath the board.

"Shit, just toss 'em in the bucket, Sandy," Sgt. Williard said, after the third trooper in a row watching the demonstration fell over in a dead faint and had to be dragged away.

"Sure thing, Sarge," Sandy said and began trying to make the needles stick into the pile of plastic syringes already in the bucket.

"Yeah," Dum-Dum said. "I sure am glad we don't have to clean and sharpen these things anymore."



The next two troopers within hearing misinterpreted his comment and promptly folded over like collapsing tents.

"Don't say things like that," Williard ordered, puffing on his cigar. "These candy asses faint too often as it is." He was still aggravated at having to drive the shot team over to the compound and was being a little lax at reining in the men, who were still high on codeine and having a little fun at the expense of the unhappy troops in line. This wasn't his favorite duty and he just wanted it to be over with. Had he known what was going on back at the tanker battalion, he would have wanted it to be finished much sooner.

While Williard was grumpily supervising his shot team and absently comparing this mundane duty with Jason's combat in F-4's and Jerry, his other brother's destroyer duty in the Tonkin Gulf, Sgt. Major Crock, in his capacity as Sgt. Major of the tanker battalion compound had decided to inspect the dispensary area. Normally, he wouldn't have concerned himself overmuch with the medics, but Colonel Pinkerton's suggestion that he keep an eye on Sgt. Williard's doings impelled him in that direction. Surprisingly, he found the dispensary area well policed, with no sign that a jungle juice party had ever occurred. Mama-San had taken care of that early, and was now busy making up the cots, except for the one Heavy was passed out on. The tent flaps were raised so that Crock could see into the tent. He spied Heavy, still passed out. An odor of alcohol wafted outside and assaulted his nostrils. Drunk, by God, he thought. And on duty, too. Theoretically, the dispensary was open until four o'clock, when the enlisted club opened for business. He entered the tent and shook Heavy's recumbent form.

"Whathafuck you want?" Heavy said, cracking a single eyelid and blowing alcoholic breath into Sgt. Major Crock's face.

Crock waved away the fumes. "Aren't you supposed to be on duty, soldier?"

"Naw, I'm sick," Heavy said.

"You're drunk, Goddamnit. I'm going to report you."

"Crockashit," Heavy mumbled, trying to get his brain in order.

"What was that? What did you say?"

"I shaid I'm sick. Here, look for yourself." Heavy pulled out his billfold and extracted an RX form. Crock took it from his hand and



read: Patient subject to P.M. lethargy due to FUO. Unavailable for duty in afternoons except for medical emergency. The RX carried Captain Harkness' signature. Harkness had long ago bowed to the inevitable and signed anything Williard put in front of him. He was scared that if he didn't, Williard might go on strike and force him to see patients every morning instead of playing with Junie.

"What the hell is FUO?" Crock asked suspiciously.

"It's a tropical disease, sheargeant," Heavy said. Actually, FUO was the acronym for "fever of undetermined origin," a catchall term for any debilitating disease accompanied by fever which went undiagnosed. Sgt. Williard carefully renewed Heavy's RX every week, just in case.

"Well, who's in charge here if you can't function?"

"Go see the Junkman."

"Junkman? Who the hell is the Junkman?"

"In the dispens'ry," Heavy said, and passed back out, still clutching the RX in his hand.

"Shit, I don't believe this," Sgt. Major Crock said. He might have tried to re-awaken Heavy and quiz him further, but the alcohol fumes were beginning to make him dizzy. Instead, he headed for the dispensary building.

Junkman was sitting at Sgt. Williard's desk, staring into space, off on some trip not readily visible to uninfluenced mortals. Crock waved a hand in front of his face until he came more or less back to reality.

"Are you in charge here?"

Pause. Junkman was so spacey that it took several seconds before words registered.

"Yep," he finally answered.

"Are you sober?"

Pause. "Yep."

Sgt. Major Crock sniffed. There was only a faint residual hint of alcohol on the man's breath. Junkman stared somewhere over



Crock's left shoulder.

"Well, what's wrong with you then?"

Pause. "FUO."

"I don't believe this shit. Where's your sergeant?"

Pause. "Gone shooting."

"Shooting? Who's he shooting at?"

Pause. "Men."

Sgt. Major Crock controlled an angry outburst, barely. He couldn't hear any shots being fired. "Specialist, please tell me, who is your sergeant shooting at. I don't hear anything."

Pause. "Giving shots."

"Oh." It dawned on him. The medics were off giving shots somewhere. Still... "Specialist, I think you must be high on something. I think I better report you."

Pause. Junkman didn't speak this time, but a long minute later, he pulled out his billfold and extracted an RX form for the sergeant major to read. Crock took it. He read: This patient is slow of speech and may require several seconds before answering questions due to residual effects of FUO. Available for duty so long as another medic is present." It was signed by Captain Harkness.

"Shit. Where's this other medic?"

Pause. Junkman slowly raised an arm and pointed to the hooch. "Heavy."

"Heavy? What's heavy, you crazy bastard?"

Pause. "Him."

Crock couldn't quite believe it. "You mean that drunk in there on the cot that's also got FUO?"

Pause. "Yep."

"This is the weirdest fucking dispensary I ever saw. Do you bastards belong to the same army I do?"



Pause. "Crockofshit," Junkman said.

"What? What was that you said?"

Pause. "Sgt. Major Crock," Junkman said.

"Ah, fuckit," Sgt. Major Crock said. He left the Junkman staring into space and walked back to his own headquarters tent. He decided to consult with Major Hollis about the FUO that these weird medics seemed to be afflicted with, if there was such a thing, and at the same time, report Sgt. Williard for leaving the dispensary occupied by two obviously incapacitated medics. That would be something he could tell Colonel Pinkerton about, too. He found Major Hollis in his office. He was sitting at his desk with his eyes closed, wrapped up in a codeine dream.

"Major Hollis," Crock said, trying to get the Major's attention.

Fortunately, codeine is a rather mild narcotic, not nearly so powerful as what the Junkman took in by smoking. The Major's dream dissolved into a voice coming to him from a far distance.

"Major Hollis? Sir? Are you all right?"

Hollis opened his eyes and came back to earth, thanking all the Gods that his hangover was gone. "Oh, it's you, Sergeant Major. What is it?"

"Sir, I think there's something weird about these medics we have here on the compound. The two on duty right now are both acting crazy, but they have excuses from the doctor. Something about UFO."

"You mean FUO, don't you?"

"Well, yeah. Sir, I think they're really drunk and high. Suppose we had a sudden emergency?"

Major Hollis remembered how quickly Sgt. Williard had cured his hangover. "Well, Sgt. Major, I guess we have to leave medical problems to the medics, don't we? Gosh, just this morning, I had a terrible hangov--I mean Migraine headache, and Sgt. Williard took care of it for me. In fact, if it weren't for Sgt. Williard, I don't believe I could have gotten the convoys organized and on the road this morning."



I can believe that, the sergeant major thought. "Really, sir, don't you think we should do something about these medics? They don't act like they're really in the same army as the rest of us."

"Oh, no, Sergeant. Believe me, they are all good men. Just wait until you get sick sometime. They will take care of you just as expeditiously as they did me this morning."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Crock muttered under his breath.

"Crockofshit," Major Hollis muttered under his breath, beginning to slip back into his dream.

"What? What's that you said? Sir?"

Hollis blinked back into normal space. "Nothing. Anything else, Sergeant Major?"

"No sir, I guess not." Sergeant Major Crock saluted and went back into his own cubbyhole in the headquarters tent to think. It was obvious that the compound commander was going to be no help in controlling Sgt. Williard or the medics, but there must be some way. If ever control was needed, it was with that unit.

Chapter Nine

By the time the shot team was back on the compound, Junkman was coming down from his high and Heavy was just waking up to his second hangover of the day.

"Any patients come in while I was gone?" Williard asked Junkman.

"Naw. Crock of Shit came by, though."

"What did he want?"

Junkman tried to revive the memory. "Just looking around, I think. He said I was crazy and Heavy was drunk."

"Ah, shit. Always problems. Did he report you?"



"Naw. I showed him my excuse."

"How about Heavy?"

"He probably did, too, but I doubt if he'll remember."

Williard considered. He didn't like the thought of Crock nosing around his dispensary. There were too many things there that wouldn't bear close scrutiny and Sergeants Major had an inordinate amount of power in the regular army. Crock of Shit could possibly cause problems if he didn't do something about him, and the sooner the better.

"Have we got any little brown fucking machines on hold right now?" He asked. Little brown fucking machines were the term for professional hookers, working as mama-sans or KP's on the compound in their alternate identity. The dispensary was informally responsible for keeping them more or less clean and disease free. Williard's hold over them was almost complete, since they depended on him to cure any sexually transmitted disease they picked up.

"Honeybunch was in yesterday. Said her mouth was hurting, but Heavy hasn't finished her lab test yet," Junkman said.

Honeybunch was a hooker who worked at the tanker battalion's informal mess, where the officers and senior NCO's ponied up enough money each month so that they could eat away from the common herd. Honeybunch was fifteen or sixteen years old and specialized in blowjobs.

"Oh, yeah, I remember now," Williard said. "Just what the doctor ordered. When she comes by in the morning, tell her to go see Crock of Shit first while he's napping after noon chow, then she can come back later for her shot." He assumed, and was almost certainly correct, that her lab test would come back positive. When treating the hookers, Williard always delayed for a day or two with a couple of them for just such problems as this.

"Do you think he'll go for it?" Junkman asked. "I hear he's a real straight arrow!"

"Does a bear shit in the woods? Besides, she'll probably be finished before he gets half awake." Honeybunch's reputation was awesome.

"Got it," Junkman said, glancing at his watch. "The club's open. You heading that way?"



"No, you go ahead. I need to talk to Heavy."

Heavy was sitting on the edge of his bunk, trying to lace up his boots. Every time he bent over, the throbbing in his head increased its tempo so rapidly that he was only able to get a couple of laces done before the pain became unbearable. He had been lacing for a half hour now.

"Let me help," Williard said.

"Geez, Sarge, are you really going to finish lacing my boots for me?"

"Get real, Heavy. Here, take these." Williard produced two APC's with codeine, wondering as he did whether he was doing Heavy a disservice. The young man was drinking so heavily that if anything ever happened to him while he wasn't watching out for him, there would be no one else to protect him and he would almost certainly wind up in trouble. For that matter, he worried about what would happen to the whole outfit if he were not around. They had come to depend on him more than they should to keep the wolves such as Crock at bay and it worried him.

Heavy grabbed the pills like a drowning sailor clutching at a life preserver. He reached beneath his bunk, produced a can of beer and swallowed the pills.

"Thanks, Sarge. You're a life saver."

"No problem. Do you remember Crock of Shit coming around to see you today?"

"I don't even remember today, let alone Crock of Shit."

"Never mind then. I just wanted to tell you that he's going to be coming in on sick call in a couple of days. He's going to have the clap for sure, but I suspect his lab tests are going to show syphilis and incipient soft chancre as well. Get me?"

"You're going to scare the shit out of him. He's married."

"That's the idea, but it's not our fault. A married man like him shouldn't be fooling around with Honeybunch."

"It's a good idea, too," Heavy agreed, a vague memory of the sergeant major standing over his bunk coming into focus. "Imagine,



that crock of shit accused me of being drunk on duty. Say, when did he get the clap?"

"He got it at noon tomorrow."

**Heavy got his last lace tied and wavered to his feet.
"Tomorrow? Oh. I remember now. Gosh, it's dark outside. How did that happen?"**

"You stuck your head in that blood cooler early instead of late. Want to come to the club with me?"

"Sure, why not. Gosh, I haven't been awake at night since the last time you told me we got hit."

"You weren't awake long then," Williard said. The last real combined mortar and sniper attack had occurred just after dark. Heavy had awakened, grabbed his rifle, then collapsed again and had to be dragged into the bunker. He didn't really remember the incident, as usual, but took the other men's word for it.

"I can't help it if I'm a heavy sleeper."

"It's probably that FUO," Williard said. One day soon, he was going to have to set Heavy down and talk seriously to him. It would be a shame to lose him over some drunken mistake when he really had such a lot of potential. Besides, he liked Heavy, drunkard or not.

"Must be," Heavy agreed. "That UFO is nasty stuff." He downed the last of his beer.

Sgt. Major Crock appeared at the medical tent two days later, just as Williard had predicted. He was waiting there just as Williard and Heavy came in from their morning run, sweat running down their faces and soaking their green tee shirts. How do those bastards manage to run five miles every morning after drinking all day? He wondered. He should have asked himself the question in reverse. Williard, and especially Heavy, held a firm notion that it was the daily run which enabled them to drink so much.

"Good morning Sergeant Major!" Williard said. "You're here bright and early. It's not even time for sick call, and we haven't eaten yet." He pulled a green handkerchief from his back fatigue pocket and wiped his face, then wrung it out and stuffed it back in his pocket. "Nothing like a morning run to work up an appetite," he



added.

"Sgt. Williard, I need to see a doctor right away."

"I'm almost a doctor," Williard said.

"I think I better see one of the medical officers, Sergeant."

"Whatever you say, Sergeant Major. I'll have to pull your medical records in that case, of course, and that gossipy Captain Harkness will have to write every little symptom down on your chart. Let me call my medical records clerk. He's a real conscientious young soldier, always double checks the records to make sure the captain enters everything according to regulations. His only real fault is that sometimes he talks too much."

The sergeant major abruptly re-considered. "Uh, maybe you could just take care of my little problem before Captain Harkness shows up. No sense bothering him this early."

"He won't be in for a little while," Williard said, glancing at his watch as if Harkness was due to arrive soon, rather than poking his head into the tent sometime shortly before noon chow to ask if there were any problem cases he needed to see.

"Great. I mean, can we get this done?"

"OK, come on in," Williard said, as if he were making a great concession. "Heavy, you better come along too, just in case we have to do some lab."

Sergeant Major Crock did indeed have the clap, as the slide Heavy quickly prepared and blotted dry proved. It only took a couple of minutes, but he waited a full half hour before returning to the front of the tent with his report, having been instructed to let the sergeant major sweat for a while. "Whew! My eyes are hurting from staring into that microscope so long. Sergeant Major," Heavy said. "I hate to tell you, but I not only found *Neisseri gonorrhoeae*, but *Treponema pallidum* and incipient *Hemophilus ducreyi* right along with it. You're in bad shape."

Sgt. Major Crock turned pale. The only word he recognized from the mouthful of medical jargon was gonorrhea. "Ohmigod. What are those other things? Can you cure them?" Why hadn't he gotten rid of that girl instead of letting her finish?

"It's the clap, the syph, and the beginnings of soft chancre,"



Heavy said, "but you gotta talk to the doc here about a cure. I'm just the lab tech. I'm sure as hell glad I don't have all that shit, though. Nice to see you again, Sergeant Major. I gotta go. Lots of luck." Heavy made a discrete exit before the sergeant major could ask him any more questions, such as how syphilis and soft chancre could have appeared so soon after his indiscretion with Honeybunch's mouth. Those two diseases took weeks to manifest themselves.

"God, my wife will kill me if I come home with any of this shit," Sergeant Major Crock groaned, visions of divorce and alimony payments racing through his mind.

"Relax, Sergeant Major. We'll get you cured." Williard seemed to muse a bit. "Of course there have been cases where outdated penicillin accidentally got mixed up with the good stuff. I remember one case sort of like yours. That old expired penicillin didn't help a bit, poor guy. He went back to the world with second stage syphilis and a fully developed soft chancre. I heard later his wife divorced him and he's having to pay half his retirement in alimony."

"God, you don't have any of the outdated stuff, do you?" Crock asked apprehensively. He hadn't quite caught on yet.

"It's hard to tell," Williard said. "We try to watch, but some always seems to slip through. Government contractors, you know. Them sorry civilians are always trying to make a dishonest buck off of the government. I'll read the label real close, but you know, sometimes the expiration date is kind of faded. It's the heat and humidity in them warehouses in Saigon what makes the labels hard to make out sometimes."

"I can see how that might happen," Sergeant Major Crock said, beginning to see the cards on the table. God, what if the sergeant really did treat him with outdated medicine? He folded his hand. "I'll trust you, Sarge. In fact, the next time I get over to see your brigade commander, I'll even put in a good word for you. Colonel Pinkerton, isn't it?"

"That's him," Williard said. "I appreciate that, Sergeant Major. Let's go get your shot. I'll check that label real close." So, Crock had already been to see the colonel at least once. He was glad now he had decided to act so swiftly. Crock shouldn't be a problem anymore.

Williard ostentatiously checked the label on the vial of penicillin and allowed Crock to read it as well. He drew up the thick white mixture in a syringe and injected him in the hip, giving just a little extra twist of the needle to remind him who was calling the shots



now.

"Crockofshit," he muttered to himself as he went off to find out if there was any S.O.S left in the mess hall. If there wasn't, he might just call the sergeant major in for another shot to be sure he was really cured. Damn it, here lately it seemed as if he no longer got one threat taken care of than another popped up.

Sick call was considerably reduced this morning, most troopers having recovered from the ravages of the jungle juice party two days ago. It was boring.

Clap.

Another clap.

A cough.

Ringworm.

Another clap.

A chancre, which he was sure was first stage syphilis, but he sent the trooper back for a dark field exam by Heavy just to make sure, and to give Heavy enough work to keep him more or less out of his cooler. Heavy scraped the lesion with a short little applicator stick of his own devising. The end of it was cut at an angle to provide more surface area. The soft wood absorbed and held a large drop of liquid scrapings from the chancre. He dispensed a drop of saline onto a glass slide, mixed the scrapings in the saline and dropped a coverslip over the mixture. Then carefully, trying to still his shaking hands, he dispensed one drop of immersion oil onto the top of the coverslip and another onto the darkfield condenser beneath the slide. Slowly, he brought the condenser into contact with the bottom of the slide and the oil immersion lens of his microscope down into the drop of oil on top of the coverslip. He focused. A dark background came into view, interspersed with bright points of light. He twisted the fine focus gently. Several of the bright points resolved into thin, corkscrew like organisms, wiggling vigorously in the saline solution. *Treponema pallidum*, the causative organism of syphilis. He wrote out the report, gave it to the waiting trooper, and as soon as he was out of sight, reached into his blood cooler and pulled out a beer. Ballentine. He shuddered and punched it open. Ballentine's was better than nothing, but just barely.



Another clap.

A walking pneumonia, which Williard suspected from the lung sounds, but he let the X-Ray tech, Specialist Zanders, usually called the Zapper, confirm it. He brought back a dripping film which Williard hung over the background light and read there. An upper lung was blurred with gathering fluid. He sent the trooper back to get a sputum specimen for Heavy to culture, just in case it was caused by an organism resistant to the penicillin which he had Junkman inject, then gave the soldier three days of bed rest, a rare distinction.

Another clap.

A bullhead clap. This was only mildly interesting. Bullhead clap was the moniker assigned to cases where the Neisseria organism infected the inner foreskin of uncircumcised males as well as the urethra, its normal habitat. It wasn't that common, but Williard had already seen enough cases of it to give it only a cursory glance. Treatment was the same as with a normal dose, except for prescribing a tube of antibiotic ointment to complement the usual penicillin.

A nosebleed, which with a little questioning he decided was caused by the young trooper taking an excessive amount of aspirin while trying to cure a hangover from too many bottles of aldehyde-laced Vietnamese beer he had consumed at a truck wash. The young trooper apologized so profusely for coming to sick call that Williard suggested that the next time he had a "migraine," he come to see him sooner rather than later.

Another clap.

A cold, good enough for a bottle of G.I. Gin.

A sprained ankle, good for an ace bandage.

Another clap.

Another clap. Goddamn, if the army would just close all those fucking truck washes, his workload would be cut in half.

A trooper complaining of hair loss. This one Williard examined closely, then laughed. "Son, the only thing you got wrong is you're going bald. Any baldness in your family?"

"My Dad."

"See?"



"I'm too young to go bald."

"You oughta see one of my men. He lost his hair from a fungus, and there ain't any baldness in his family. When you get back to the world, start looking for a wig. You're going to need one before too much longer."

Hard chancre, almost certainly syphilis.

Bloody diarrhea. Sent back to Heavy for a stool specimen cup to collect some of the discharge for examination. It could be (and probably was) *Entamoeba histolytica*, a one celled parasite that if untreated could not only ravage the intestine but possibly spread to other body organs. Heavy took a wire loop of the blood tinged feces, immersed it in saline, dropped a coverslip over the mixture and focused the high-dry, the medium lens of his microscope. It was *Entamoeba histolytica*, the triphammer flowing of pseudopods of the amoebae being almost certainly diagnostic. He sent back his report and Willard wrote out a prescription for the proper medicine for Yup-Yup to dispense, along with a note for three days of light duty.

A simple diarrhea, which he treated with kaopectate after again having Heavy collect a stool specimen to be examined at his leisure. Odds were about fifty-fifty that this would turn out to be caused by another little one-celled parasite called *Giardia lamblia*, but it was not nearly as serious. Some people went their whole lives harboring this one and never knew it.

Another clap.

A cold.

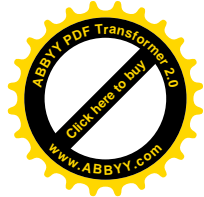
Another cold.

A backache.

Another backache, this one requiring an X-Ray to rule out a disc problem.

Another clap.

Another clap, and that was the last. The morning had been so unproductive of any real challenge to his expertise that Willard made a decision that the next day he would take a party of medics on a medcap mission to Binh Caht, a nearby village where the local Vietnamese always presented a wealth of medical problems, many of



them never seen back in the states. He dropped by the officer's tent to inform Captain Harkness.

"Knock, knock," he said in front of the tent flap.

Harkness hastily removed his hand from inside Junie's blouse. "Come in," He said.

Williard pushed the flap away and stepped inside. "Hi Doc. Not interrupting anything, am I?"

"Not at all, Sarge. How did sick call go?"

"Dull as an empty beer bottle. If Short Round could talk, he could take care of most of it. I think I'll take the guys to Binh Caht tomorrow afternoon and use up some of our outdated medicine. It's bound to be more interesting than a pile of dirty dicks."

"OK. I guess you want me to hang around, huh?"

"Either you or Captain Duarez, just in case there's an emergency of some sort."

"I'll stay," Harkness said. He would let Duarez take off and he could spend the afternoon in the tent with Junie.

"Number one. See you later."

Williard left, and Harkness went back to what he had been doing. Neither man had noticed how attentively Junie had been listening. She knew far more English than she pretended to.

All Vietnamese were required to be off the compound by nightfall. That was fine with Junie. She hurried home that evening and immediately climbed onto her bicycle. Two hours later, she parked it off the road by a concealed trail that led into the jungle and trotted along it for another hour. Finally, she slowed and called out tentatively. A figure emerged from the darkness, barely visible in the black pajama-like garments he wore. Moonlight glinted off the banana clip and barrel of a K-47, the standard infantry weapon of the Viet Cong.

Chapter Ten



Nguyen Nguyen, the local Viet Cong commander, was sipping from a bottle of root wine and making a disgusted face with each sip, wishing he had something better to drink. He squatted beneath a camouflage tent that melded almost perfectly with the jungle canopy in daylight. At night, it was only a black shadow above him. The sides were rolled up, allowing him to see through the mosquito netting out into the murky darkness of the camp where other soldiers lounged or slept in hammocks, enjoying a period of relative freedom from patrols. Looking out, he saw a small blurry figure approaching, accompanied by a larger one carrying a rifle. A moment later Junie was ushered into his presence. She saluted her commander.

"Ah, Tienh. You were not due to report yet. You must bring news from the big round-eye devils."

"Indeed I do, Commander. I have learned that the American medics will be coming to Binh Caht tomorrow. The sergeant told the doctor in my presence."

"The doctor. Do you also bring intelligence from him?"

"None. The doctor takes orders from the big sergeant. He knows nothing and does nothing except take my clothes off several times a day. I wish I could sleep with the sergeant instead of the captain."

"Why is that, Tienh?"

"If I must make love with an American in order to further our cause, it would be nice to enjoy it. The captain is like a young rabbit. My friend Twe tells me the sergeant is like the water buffalo, strong and patient."

"Perhaps I can have your orders changed later. But perhaps not. After all, you did receive the intelligence that the American medics will come to Binh Caht tomorrow while you were with the Captain. In the meantime, you have done well. We will use what you have learned."

"Will you kill the sergeant, commander?" Junie asked. If it were the captain, she thought she wouldn't care, but visualizing the vibrant young sergeant in a body bag gave her the shivers.

"That is not for you to know. Will the Americans be bringing their soap?"



"Always they bring soap. The sergeant has many, many boxes of it."

"Good. We are running low. Thank you Tienh. You may go."

As soon as Junie was out of sight, Nguyen Nguyen set the root wine out of sight and began calling in his subordinates. This was a chance too good to miss, even if it did cut off his soap supplies in the future.

Some of his NCO's disagreed.

"The American sergeant treats our illness and wounds and never asks questions, even though he must know that all his patients are not simple villagers. Also, he hands out soap to almost everyone. Should we give this up by killing him?" Argued one of them.

"It would be not only him we kill, but his companions as well, and it would be no trouble. The medics are not fighters. Tienh tells me that they are usually drunk or sporting with prostitutes. Besides, you know our orders. Whenever a chance occurs, we must kill the round-eye colonists; otherwise our country will never be free."

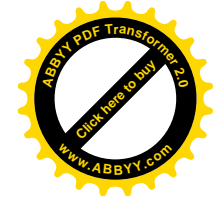
"If it must be, then so be it. Will we ambush them on their way?"

"Why do that? As you said, they treat us as well as the villagers who are still loyal to the puppets in Saigon. We will wait while they pass out medicine and soap, being sure that we are there early to be first in line. As soon as all who need medicine have been seen, they must hurry away. When they are clear then we will strike. The village chief and his cohorts will be there, too. We can kill them all at once."

"It is a good plan, Commander," the senior NCO said. "We will prepare the cart now."

"Hurry," Nguyen Nguyen said. "It must be ready by daylight."

The senior NCO's departed. What a crazy war this is, Nguyen Nguyen thought. The Americans come to the villages, treat our illnesses, then we shoot at them. He uncorked his root wine again, thinking that if his plans came off, he might be promoted into a cadre closer to Saigon where he could get a decent drink once in a while.



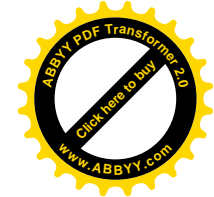
"How much soap do you want to take, Sarge?" Dum-Dum asked the next day, right after sick call. He was already loading his stockpile of outdated medicines into the cracker box.

"Ah, hell, bring a few hundred bars. We sure got enough of it."

Once Sgt. Williard had gotten bored with the common place illnesses he usually saw on the tanker compound and begun going out to the near-by villages, he had quickly decided that many of the illnesses he saw could be blamed on a simple lack of soap. He had written an old girl friend about the problem, not realizing how idealistic she was. The old girl friend promptly managed, through her on the back relationship with the editor of a metropolitan newspaper, to have the problem publicized, not only describing it, but listing the APO address of Williard's dispensary. The ultimate result was that patriotic citizens who still approved of the war began mailing tons of hand soap to Sgt. Williard. It came in small boxes, large boxes, medium size boxes, and sometimes even in bags. It came as Dove, as Ivory, 99 and 44/00 percent pure, and as Dial, which everyone wished his neighbor would use. It came as Tide and Cheer and Lifebouy, in cakes and bundles and packages in such quantity that he had finally had to scrounge an extra conex container to store the stuff in.

There was enough soap to clean every sore on every Vietnamese body within a hundred mile radius, and enough to spare for the local Viet Cong masquerading as ill non-combatants. Williard dispensed it freely and it did indeed provide cleaner bodies, even those which wound up dead. Lately, he had begun hearing, on those occasions, where a local body count was taken after an action, the grunts were beginning to notice how clean the bodies were, and how many searches of them revealed bars of American soap in their packs. Unknown to him, the grunts reported this sinister development. Now it was driving a five man spook team in Saigon to the dog kicking stage trying to figure out why the Viet Cong were suddenly carrying around bars of American soap on their persons. Since the soap came into the country through parcel post, they had yet to discover its origin.

When Sgt. Williard needed a little extra money, he also sent a case or two of soap home with mama-san in the evening and collected his money the next morning. He knew that not only soap, but probably a large part of the medicine he dispensed on Medcap missions, found its way to the Viet Cong. He felt no guilt in doing this, being idealistic enough to think that some of them might be grateful enough to come back on the government side of the war. Besides, so far as he was concerned, he was doing the grunts a favor by providing clean bodies for them to count and, in the meantime, soap sales



helped finance his poker games. In fact, the local market had lately become so flooded with soap that the price was dropping precipitously, hence his recent excursion with insect repellent to divert the market in another direction until demand caught back up with supply.

Civilian contractors really were getting to the government. Fully a third of the medicines Dum-Dum ordered were outdated by the time they arrived, or went out before they could be used up. Williard very carefully saw to the paperwork that listed them as outdated and destroyed, and then stored them out of sight until he needed them. Some he actually did destroy, those long outdated, but he used the rest on the theory that the manufacturers allowed plenty of margin for error. Apparently his theory was right, because on return missions to the same villages, he found that tetracycline syrup, for instance, six or so months past its expiration date, still cured ear infections, strep throat and some diarrhea he suspected was caused by *Shigella sonniae*, a bacteria in the same class as those which caused typhoid.

Binh Caht, the village they were going to this afternoon, was located on the banks of a moderate sized river and not too far from the compound.

Dum-Dum drove the cracker box with some of the medical specialists while Williard drove the deuce and a half. Heavy rode in front with him, while Tex and the other medics rode in back with the canvas top rolled up so they could see. Tex held his army issue forty-five in his hand all the way, dreaming hopefully that they would be attacked so he could show off his marksmanship to the other troops. Williard also carried his forty-five, slung by a simple strap over his right shoulder so that the holstered weapon rested on his left chest. He also brought along his M-14 rifle, just in case. All the other troops carried M-14's as well. So far as weapons were concerned, medics were at the end of the supply line. The new M-16's had not made it to the dispensary yet.

Sgt. Williard had absolutely no authorization to perform medcap missions, but so far, none of the authorities had bothered him about it. He had first gotten into it by being asked to treat some of the women and children who frequented the little tarpaper and beer can village outside the gate. From there he had gradually expanded his operations, partly because of boredom, but also because he loved kids and had been horrified by some of the illnesses he saw in them, many of which were easily curable with simple medicines. So far as he was concerned, and from what he had seen so far, the children were the real losers in this war. Medcap missions were sort



an anodyne to him, lessening his subconscious guilt for not doing as much to help win the war as his brothers were.

As soon as Williard cleared the gate, he heard the pop of Heavy cracking one of the beers he had brought along. He glanced over at his companion and watched him sucking up the warm foam before it got away.

Heavy wiped his mouth. Williard heard him start to speak, then hesitate before saying anything.

"Something on your mind, Heavy?"

"I was just wondering, Sarge. Do you think we're really doing any good on these medcap missions?"

"Well, yeah, I do," Williard said. "Why do you ask?" It was unusual for Heavy to question any of his actions.

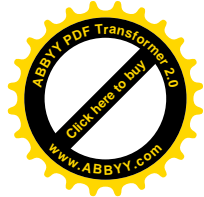
"Just think, Sarge. We give out medicine and soap and bandage up wounds and pull teeth and all that, but what happens once the war is over? All we will have accomplished is getting those poor people used to what they won't have once we leave. It seems futile, somehow."

Out of the mouths of babes. Williard had thought of that himself but never mentioned it to anyone else. "At least they will know medicine and soap is available somewhere in the world. In the meantime, let's just hope we're doing a little bit of good. It can't hurt and it might help."

Heavy took another drink of his beer. "I guess. I'm not complaining, mind. I like to go with you, even if I do have to drink warm beer."

Williard laughed. Old Heavy. Always thinking about his beer. He turned off the paved road and onto a dusty, narrow lane that wound past rice fields then into and out of jungle and past more paddies.

There was a protocol to be followed on the medcap missions, especially as Williard never gave out his itinerary in advance, knowing that half the Vietnamese workers on the compound were probably part-time Viet Cong. He doubted that they would be ambushed, at least so long as he kept the soap pipeline open, but he was never one to take unnecessary chances. When he came in sight of the village he drove the truck past the usual thatched huts, open air



market, around pigs and ducks wandering in the streets, narrowly avoided a curious water buffalo and parked in front of the largest structure in the village, the chief's home. It was constructed of cinderblocks and surrounded by barbed wire. Two ARVN privates sporting old WWII carbines with the cracked stocks taped together stood a desultory guard in front of the sandbagged entrance. He and Heavy stepped down from the deuce and a half, leaving the others in place. The two guards waved them through the gate. A stone path bordered by tiny fishponds led up to the door.

An elderly white-bearded Vietnamese man, obviously the village chief, greeted them, inquiry written all over his face. Then he began smiling as his weak old eyes recognized Williard and Heavy.

"Ah, Sergeant Jim. So happy to see you again."

"Hi, Papa-San! How is your eye?" Williard asked. The last time he had been here, the old man had been suffering an eye infection. He had given him some antibiotic ophthalmic ointment.

"Fine, fine, Sgt. Jim. Come inside." The old man escorted them to a large living room dominated by a century old teak table and chairs where he conducted business. Soon he had cups of weak tea ready, poured into small, paper thin porcelain cups. Williard and Heavy promptly slurped a third of it down. Heavy pulled out a two-ounce bottle of airline brandy caged from Angie, his nurse friend, who had connections with some stewardesses. He emptied it into their cups.

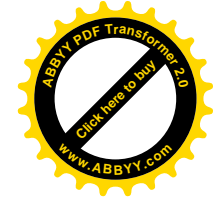
The old man tugged on his white beard and threw a question at them. "What go in tea?" His English was very good, though he sometimes shortened the verbiage.

"Medicine for FUO. Very Good, makes it go away," Williard said.

"Ah, so," the chief commiserated. "I hope you get well soon,"

"This will help," Heavy said drinking down the brandied tea. It settled pleasantly in his stomach while he wondered how it had managed to avoid being incorporated into the jungle juice at the last party. Williard sipped his more cautiously.

Another few minutes of polite conversation took place, then one of the ubiquitous kids who followed loose soldiers everywhere peeked a head into the room. He spoke briefly to the chief, then hurried away. The chief rose to his feet.



"The people will be ready soon, Sgt. Jim." He had trouble pronouncing 'Williard', but even using his first name, he never failed to include the honorific, especially since he knew the sergeant would turn over any leftover soap to him when the mission was over. He used it to supplement the meager salary of his guards. Most ARVN soldiers weren't paid enough to support a family and used proceeds from sale of the soap to keep their wives and daughters out of the Binh Hoa bars, a city near Long Binh Williard and Heavy sometimes frequented.

The chief ushered them out to the vehicles. There was room for him in the front seat of the truck since Heavy took up only negligible room. A short drive ended in front of an old abandoned brick factory on a slope near the river. The medics quickly set up a couple of folding tables, unloaded the soap and outdated medicine, and then eyed the line of waiting patients. It already stretched beyond the number they could reasonably see in a couple of hours.

Williard was amazed at the number of villagers already present. How had word gotten out so fast? Many of the patients normally had to come in from the rice fields after he arrived. There was some pushing and shoving going on, mostly women and children being displaced to make room for healthy appearing young men. An apprehensive look appeared on the chief's wrinkled face. Williard scanned the crowd, trying to figure out what was wrong. Something in his gut began telling him to be careful. Was there an epidemic of some kind here? He could see no signs of one. A quick perusal of the first Vietnamese men in line showed only the normal sores, infected wounds and scratches, untreated skin fungus and paler than normal faces. He didn't have time to wonder further. The first patient stepped forward. The chief stood by his side, ready to interpret. He eyed the young men at the front of the line and hoped they would not cause problems. He knew them to be Viet Cong.

Williard only had to speak to about every third patient. Usually the problem was obvious, pus running from an ear, a jungle sore, a gripping of the buttocks, indicating diarrhea. About one in five simply produced a piece of paper for him to read. It was written in Vietnamese, but that didn't matter. One word was in English, streptomycin. Streptomycin was the antibiotic used to treat tuberculosis, but it should be given in conjunction with PAS, para-aminosalicylic acid, to really be effective. Unfortunately, there was very little of the drug available in the country except for American supplies. Williard had a limited amount of it, with almost good dates. Any American with TB was promptly rotated home so it went unused at the dispensary.



Williard listened to chests and observed the general health of the supplicants. Where he felt the disease had progressed beyond easy treatment, he dispensed plain aspirin. When he thought the PAS might help, he let it go, especially to the younger patients. The poorer ones, he felt certain, would simply sell it to the Viet Cong or more affluent villagers, suffering ill health in favor of feeding their bellies, but he had no way of telling which was which.

To almost every patient, he dispensed a bar of soap. It was needed. Half of the villagers in line were suffering from sores, infected cuts and scrapes, fungus diseases and other ailments which simple cleansing would go a long way toward curing.

Occasionally a patient would present a recent open wound. If it weren't too complicated, he let Heavy sew it up. Heavy was trying to branch out from his laboratory specialization in hope of emulating Williard and someday having his own command. The wounds that went into muscle tissue, he sewed up himself. Some of the lacerations and punctures looked suspiciously like shrapnel wounds from American mortars or artillery, but he treated them anyway. Even if they were members of the local Viet Cong, it was good practice in case the local charlies ever improved their aim when they mortared the compound.

Whenever a patient opened his or her mouth and pointed to their teeth, he directed them over to Toothless. Toothless was their dental specialist, PFC Denton from Kentucky, an Appalachian state where bad teeth were epidemic. He was called toothless because he had no teeth of his own. He got very little business on the compound since he didn't know how to fill cavities. Any trooper coming to him with a toothache simply got their bad tooth yanked out of their mouth regardless of its condition. The word had spread and most of the tanker drivers preferred simply to suffer in silence until they could get an appointment at the field hospital. Toothless doled these appointments out judiciously through Sgt. Williard, who used them to see that their vehicles were maintained and their coolers were well stocked with food.

Toothless wasted no time with his patients. He set them in a chair, jammed some Novocain down around the roots of the tooth or teeth, then yanked them out with dental pliers and packed the socket with gauze. In the meantime, he passed out gumdrops to the kids, hoping to drum up future business.

The first box of soap emptied sooner than Williard expected, but it wasn't until he caught a small brown hand sneaking into the



second box out of the corner of his eye that he realized what was happening. The kids, hanging close to see what was going on, had quickly found they could steal a bar of soap each time Williard concentrated on listening to a chest with his stethoscope, the rustling sounds of their thievery going unnoticed while the earplugs were in. *Shit!* Williard held back a grin. He couldn't really get mad at the kids; they didn't know any better. Instead, he pulled his forty-five from its holster and slapped it down on top of the soapbox. "Bang! Bang!" He said. The kids disappeared, screaming. The adults laughed, except for the one toothless was working on. His scream mingled in with the kids as Toothless withdrew his bloody forceps, diseased tooth clutched in its grip like a trophy from the hunt.

Willard knew that most of his treatments were palliative rather than long term cures. He dispensed nitroglycerine tablets for angina, telling the chief to have the patients wait for a few minutes after the tablets dissolved under their tongues. He liked to see the relief descend on their faces as the pain lessened. It was good advertising, but there was no way to treat heart problems in the field. When he heard a heart irregularity, he gave out digoxin, this mostly to older villagers.

He pressed the fingernails of almost every patient, checking for anemia. When the white outline of his pressure didn't turn quickly back to pink, there was anemia present. Most Vietnamese were anemic by western standards. Those he suspected of really gross anemia were subjected to a finger prick by Heavy, who then drew a drop of blood up in a capillary tube and set it upright in a small tray filled with a clay-like substance which blocked the bottom end of the tube. The patient then waited fifteen minutes or so. If the red cells separated out from the serum portion of the blood quickly, falling to the bottom of the capillary tube, severe anemia was judged to be present. In most cases, Williard had no real way to determine the cause, although since hookworm, a blood drinking intestinal parasite was endemic in the country, he figured most cases derived from it. He dispensed an anti-helminthic, rightly judging that even if hookworm wasn't present, some other parasite of the same class was, and the drug would cure it just as well. For the women, he added some iron tablets.

Surprisingly, he saw very few cases of STS, sexually transmitted diseases. These were mostly confined to the larger cities or truck wash stations frequented by Americans. When he did find one, penicillin was the universal answer, outdated or not.

One pretty little girl, barely into her teens, indicated that she wanted to be taken into the little privacy alcove where he checked for



venereal disease. Williard saw enough VD in his normal practice to have little patience with it in the field. When the chief told him that the girl was complaining of a rash, he started to just give her some penicillin and let her go, but something in her imploring gaze held him back. He was a sucker for kids.

He motioned her into the alcove and pulled the curtain closed behind them. The girl pulled down the waistband of her trousers. Williard was appalled. Further examination showed the girl covered from mid-thigh to right below the navel with a crusty, brick red growth. She began crying, and Williard didn't blame her. It was the worst case of a fungus skin infection he had ever seen, probably caused by a species of *Trychophyton* of some sort, in the same category as ringworm, but much, much worse. There was a treatment, though, just recently discovered. Griseofulvin tablets ought to cure the girl and he had just enough on hand to do the trick. There was a catch, though. The drug, if taken as directed would indeed clear up the poor girl's infection, but ordinarily those taking the drug were monitored weekly for liver damage, a sometime side effect. There was no way that could be accomplished, of course. Williard compromised. He led the girl outside and had the chief give her directions for taking the tablets then admonished her that if her skin turned yellow (or if she couldn't tell, since she was sort of yellow anyway), then if the whites of her eyes turned yellow, she should discontinue the medicine. The girl promised, brushing tears from her eyes. Williard doubted that she would quit the medicine regardless of what color her eyes turned, if they did. Her liver was out of sight and the fungus was devouring her skin, creeping inexorably in the way of skin fungi outward from its initial point of infection. For a teenager of any country, a skin eruption of this extent was much worse than any hypothetical liver problems.

Back outside, he checked his watch then scanned the line. Suddenly it occurred to him that there was no one left except women, children and old men. A sensation of ants crawling up his spine swept over him but he couldn't pinpoint what was causing it.

"Papa-San! Where are the all the men?"

The old man peered around myopically. All he could see was the small blurred figures of women and children and a few stooped old men. He began to tremble.

Williard noticed the shaking. "Papa-San? What's wrong?"

"Sgt. Jim. You go now! Hurry!" He began pushing at his villagers, urging them away from the Americans in excited



Vietnamese. He sounded like a strangling turkey.

"Heavy, Dum-Dum, we'd better load up," Williard said, scanning the road sloping up toward the village. He saw two young Vietnamese men in black pajamas pushing a cart loaded with hay from a side path into the road. Why were they pushing it? A water buffalo should be dragging a cart that large. He squinted his eyes, trying to see better. A third man came into view, trailing the cart. From the distance, he appeared to be carrying a coil of wire, unreeling it as walked. One end was attached to the cart. The other two men stopped, then began maneuvering the wagon so that it would be pointing down hill. Suddenly the situation jelled, like a blurry movie screen abruptly coming into focus. He felt his testicles shrivel up into his body. *Goddamn, that's a bomb, sure as hell! We're gonna be hit!*

Chapter Eleven

There was no time to think. A kaleidoscopic barrage of images and thoughts assaulted Williard's mind like a kennel of dogs and cats let loose on each other. The village chief's frail body entangled with the villagers as he tried to get them moving; his men, shocked into activity but confused as to where the danger was coming from; shouts and screams echoing against the walls of the brick factory; and up the slope, the wagon pointing straight downhill, now two men shoving on it with hands and shoulders; Dum-Dum, throwing unused medicine into boxes; Tex, waving his pistol in a half-circle, looking for targets.

The wagon began to move. Williard shouted. "Dum-Dum! Forget the goddamn medicine! Get the cracker box moving! Tex, hit the truck! Hurry, goddamnit!"

Heavy was standing upright, a bewildered look on his face. Williard grabbed him and threw him bodily into the passenger side of the deuce and a half, just as Tex tumbled into the back, still waving his pistol. Williard leaped over Heavy and thudded into the driver's seat. He pulled the choke and cranked the engine. He looked sideways to where Dum-Dum had abandoned his pharmacy and jumped into the cracker box. The back doors were hung open. The other medics leaped inside. Williard caught Dum-Dum's silly scared grin, and twirled his upraised hand in circles then pointed uphill. There was no other way out. He shifted into low with a screech of meshing gears. The truck spun its back wheels then lurched forward. He mashed the



gas pedal to the floorboard. He saw the wagon began to move faster, on its own now, rolling downhill with the wire trailing behind. Bits of straw flew into the wind, swirling behind it like a horizontal dust devil. A glint of metal showed through the remaining straw.

Williard chanced a glance in the rear view mirror to be sure the cracker box was following then looked back to the front, where the wagon was growing larger in his vision, looming ahead like a runaway freight train. More straw flew away and the full horror of what was rolling toward them appeared, a huge finned bomb, a re-activated dud garnered from the jungle. Behind it, the two Viet Cong who had started the wagon moving disappeared into the foliage. One remained, bending over a box-like object on the ground. In front of him, loops of wire were uncoiling in jerks like thin rattlers striking at prey. The enemy looked up, eyes on the approaching truck and cracker box. *Oh Jesus, we've had it!* Williard thought. Thunder roared against his ear, and pinpoints of pain blossomed over his cheek.

Ahead, the Viet Cong collapsed, clutching his belly. "I got him!" Tex yelled. Williard breathed again, realizing that Tex must have leaned around the rolled up canopy of the truck and shot the bombardier just before he would have detonated the bomb. The cart was upon them. Williard swerved to miss it, almost losing control of the wheel. Behind him, the cracker box swerved the other way, teetered on two wheels and passed the cart in a cloud of dust.

Williard's speeding truck passed the fallen Viet Cong. He caught a glimpse of him crawling on his stomach toward the detonator, trailing a muddy stream of blood. A second later he glanced behind them. The cracker box was clear, but the wagon continued its path, rolling faster and faster down hill. It plowed into the scattering Vietnamese and went off with a deafening thunderclap and a horrendously bright flash of light. The truck bounced in the pressure wave of the blast and hit on its front wheels. Williard slammed forward into the steering wheel then was jerked violently backward as the rear wheels hit the ground. He clutched wildly at the steering wheel and regained control just in time to swerve out of the path of a galloping water buffalo. The truck rolled on, still gathering speed. He chanced another glance over his shoulder and saw bits and pieces of bodies tumbling through the air, vanishing and re-appearing in a still rising mushroom of dust and debris. A white-bearded head fell out of the cloud and bounced on the road. Papa-San. Williard's stomach lurched sickly.

A loud stutter of automatic weapons being fired rose over the screams of survivors erupting behind them. Three neat bullet holes



appeared like magic in the front fender of the truck, but fortunately missed the tire. Then they were roaring through the village in clouds of dust, scattering ducks and dogs to the four winds, like spectators running in all directions from out of control race cars on a country speed track. Williard continued to monitor the cracker box to be sure it was following, but only when they were clear of the village and several miles up the road did he slow down and pull over. The cracker box stopped behind him. He let go of the steering wheel. His hands began shaking like quaking aspens in a Colorado windstorm. He gripped the wheel again. He felt light-headed, as if the air had suddenly become bereft of oxygen.

"Did you see me get that Viet Cong?" Tex's voice coming from behind him stuttered with adrenaline overload. He gulped, turned ghostly white and vomited over the edge of the rail. Williard remembered the shot Tex had fired past his head and wiped at his face. His hand came away bloody from bits of gunpowder embedded in his cheek. Tex hadn't left much room for error.

"Yeah, I saw it. Thanks, Tex. You saved our asses. Hey, are you OK?"

"Just sick. God, those women and kids--" He retched again.

"Hang on. You'll be OK. Heavy, you got any of that brandy left?"

Heavy produced another of the little airline flasks. Williard took it from him and nudged it into Tex's hand. He climbed out of his seat and ran back toward the cracker box. Dum-Dum still had a trace of the silly smile on his face, but he was two shades whiter than normal.

"Is anyone hit here?" Williard asked, seeing several bullet holes in the side of the cracker box.

"We're all OK, Sarge," Dum-Dum said shakily. "God, the revenooers back home aren't that bad. I thought we were goners."

"We almost were. OK, let's get back to the compound." He returned to the truck, where Tex was again sitting upright and Heavy was fumbling about his body looking for another flask of Brandy. He found one and drained it in two swallows. Williard shifted into gear and drove off.

Heavy finally found his voice. "Sarge, why did they want to blow us up? I thought we were helping them?"



"Because we're in a fucking war, that's why," Williard snapped. He was still shaken. How many of the villagers had died in the blast? How many women and kids?

"I thought we were dead when I saw that bomb coming at us. I thought sure we were dead." Heavy had finally been sober enough when action was taking place to realize that there really was a war going on.

"Me, too," Tex said. "I didn't have a chance but for one shot."

"Sarge, how did you know?" Heavy asked.

Williard didn't answer. His mind was swirling with thoughts that he should have seen something wrong sooner. And how had the Viet Cong known they were coming?

"Sarge?"

"Let's talk about it later, OK? Right now I just want to get back." Williard was also realizing that there was more to the war than booze, hookers and schemes. Worse, the one operation he had felt really good about had turned into a disaster and he was responsible.

"Knock, Knock," Williard said, outside the entrance to the officer's hooch.

"Just a minute," Harkness called. Williard waited through the rustling of clothes being pulled on. The flap opened.

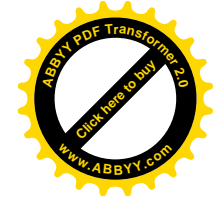
"What's up, Sarge?" Harkness said, buttoning his fatigue blouse. Behind him, Junie's eyes opened so wide that she could have almost been mistaken for a round-eye. *The big sergeant was still alive!*

"We got hit out on the medcap at Binh Caht."

"Ah, shit. I told you to stay away from those villages before you got into trouble. Was anyone hurt?"

"None of us. The chief bought it, though, along with a lot of his people. Fucking Viet Cong. Blowing up women and kids."

"Well, that's war," Harkness said, not really concerned now



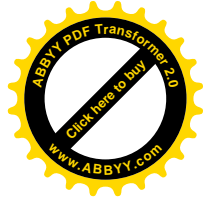
that the men were back safely. "I don't think you ought to try any more medcaps, though. How would I explain it if you got killed when you weren't authorized to be?"

"I guess it would cause you a lot of paperwork, wouldn't it? Well, just wanted to let you know." Willard turned and left. Damned Harkness. All he cares about is that Junie kid. Suddenly he remembered that he had told Harkness where they were going while Junie was present. *I wonder* -- Nah. She's too young, even if she isn't very innocent. He dismissed the subject from his mind. There was no way of knowing, and he was too upset to think about it anyway.

Williard went easy on the booze at first that night, sitting by himself in a dark corner of the NCO club tent. He had brought along a fifth of bourbon and sat sipping slowly, turning over the day's events in his mind. It was hard to absolve himself of blame. He had just been trying to do good, even if it was partly out of boredom, and look what had happened. Old Papa-San, his head blown off trying to save his villagers. The women, bits and pieces of them flying into the air like bloody rocks from an erupting volcano. And the kids. Oh god, the kids. What a sorry fucking war, he thought. Goddamnit, I ought to be doing something better over here than checking peters and making deals. He resolved again to see if there was a chance of getting to see his brother Jason. Maybe he would have some ideas. Even if he didn't, it would be good to get together. They always had fun.

Eventually, the bourbon drew Williard out of his funk. He looked around to see if a poker game was going on, even though he didn't have much money to spare. He was lucky. A few newly promoted buck sergeants were playing and he easily induced them to let him join the game. They were so awed to be playing poker with the Doc who controlled their medical destiny that they tended to forget how much money they were betting, and there was no way to read Williard's face when he held a good hand, since it was concealed by his own cigar smoke and a blue cloud of cigarette smoke that floated right about table level. One by one, they dropped out, sadder and wiser, while Williard and another old sergeant raked in their money. By the time the last of the new buck sergeants were gone, he had a respectable pile of bills in front of him, enough, he thought, for an afternoon excursion to Binh Hoa. Maybe that would take his mind off the misbegotten medcap mission.

Binh Hoa was the nearest large city to the huge Long Binh metroplex. It catered to the rear echelon and logistics troops in a fashion not seen since the occupation of Japan after WWII or perhaps



in present day Saigon. Saigon was a little far, though. It required a full day for a really satisfying excursion, and Binh Hoa was Williard's usual choice. Binh Hoa was a Conglomeration of bars, restaurants, dope dens, whorehouses, beer joints, gambling establishments, car and truck washes and vending booths where anything from black market grenades to stolen army gear and pilfered PX supplies were displayed and traded without let or hindrance. The common currency was military script and piasters, with a generous sprinkling of US dollars used to seal bargains. American troops were paid in funny money, as they called it, script that could theoretically only be spent on American bases. Actually, it served very nicely as a countrywide currency and was traded at a discount by Vietnamese money brokers. The reason they traded it at a discount was that periodically, the army command abruptly would quit honoring the old currency and issue new bills of different style and color. Williard never did understand why. The economics of military script in a war zone was too exotic for him to consider, other than when he was able to turn a profit from panic stricken money brokers when he got word in advance that the currency was going to be changed.

Most of the medics had girl friends in Binh Hoa whom they more or less supported, or thought they did. Actually, since it was only once a week or so, sometimes not even that often that they got into town, their girlfriends supplemented their stipends by hooking on the side, which was why Mop caught the clap so often. He wasn't as generous as some of the other men, or perhaps spread his largess over several girlfriends and thus was more liable to infection.

After sick call the next morning, Williard financed Heavy, who had already spent most of his month's wages on beer, and they strolled down to the heavily barbed wired and sandbagged gate. After passing through the double enclosure, Williard negotiated a fee for the both of them with one of the lined up scooter drivers. Military vehicles were not allowed in Binh Hoa. The scooters were three wheeled vehicles, the front wheel supporting the driver on a narrow seat as he steered the contraption with bicycle type handlebars, while the back two wheels carried the load of a passenger compartment sufficient for three or four bodies, or a load of black market PX supplies to go to the city if no riders were handy. There was a catch to going into Binh Hoa, for the medics at least. Since theirs was the very last compound in the string of compounds stretching to the northwest which made up the Long Binh complex, and was separated from the main compound by a stretch of Viet Cong infested jungle, the scooter drivers never ventured off the main highway unless they could get back to it before dark. That limited the men to only a few hours of



revelry, but usually that was sufficient, since they were almost always half potted by the time they arrived anyway. In fact, Heavy hooked a couple of quarts of formaldehyde-tinged beer from a convenient vendor while Williard was negotiating the scooter fee. As they climbed in, he drank from one and handed the other to Williard.

"Christ, Heavy, can't you wait til we get to town. This shit is as warm as fresh piss."

"Take a swallow or two, Sarge. You won't notice after that."

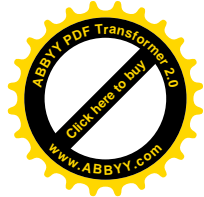
Williard did. Heavy was right. The aldehydes and ketones in the beer quickly dispelled any concern about the temperature of the brew. He sipped as they bumped along the laterite road, then tilted the quart bottle for a hefty slug once they gained the smoothness of the main highway. From there, it was only a half hour to Binh Hoa. He rode and sipped on the beer, not having any thoughts in particular, just letting his mind drift. He certainly wasn't thinking of the bullet holes in the dispensary's vehicles. Bullet holes seemed inconsequential compared with the explosion of a five hundred pound bomb, and mulling over the deaths he had inadvertently been involved with had caused him to forget how Colonel Pinkerton felt about the sanctity of military vehicles.

Since He and Heavy had skipped chow in order to beat the rush of headquarters clerks, supply clerks, off duty medics from other compounds and all the other rear area soldiers out for an afternoon of hooking and drinking, Williard had the scooter driver let them off at a restaurant in town he had heard of. It was a relic of the French occupation, back when the country had still been called French Indo-China. He ordered a steak while Heavy, flush with funds from Williard's pocket, had lobster thermidor. A bottle of milky red wine was set on the table to occupy them while the food was being prepared. Heavy immediately attacked it, and a second bottle had to be brought along with the food.

"How's the steak, Sarge," Heavy asked, digging into his lobster. He washed every other bite down with a swallow of wine.

"I oughta learn. If this isn't fucking water buffalo steak, I never seen one." The meat was tough and didn't have much of a flavor. Williard signaled their waitress. While she was making her way to their table, he covered the steak with the side dish of rice it had come with.

"Bring me some nuoc mam," he said, pointing to the pile of rice.



"Ah, you know!" The waitress exclaimed. Nuoc mam was a sauce derived from fermented fish heads. The waitress, having noted that she was serving American soldiers, had omitted it. Most occidentals gagged on the stuff, especially if told of its origins, but Williard had developed sort of a taste for it. He thought it went a long way towards nullifying the effects of aldehyde loaded Vietnamese wine and beer in some fashion known only to extinct alchemists or Dupont scientists, perhaps. At any rate, it ungummed the rice and tenderized the water buffalo steak and neutralized the beer enough so that he felt completely satisfied, especially since the tab was surprisingly reduced because of his rapport with the waitress. It also left his pyloric sphincter happy enough to pass the meal on down to the small intestine, leaving plenty of room for whatever might hang up there later.

Williard patted his stomach. "OK, I'm ready to go see the sisters now."

Heavy polished off the last of the wine. "Me, too. I bet they'll be glad to see us. It's been almost two weeks since we been here." The sisters were Williard and Heavy's part-time girl friends.

They left the restaurant and wandered down the cracked and pitted wide main street, weaving in and out among uniformed soldiers, hustling vendors, honking scooters and swarms of kids. They kept one hand on their wallets and used the other hand to swat away the ubiquitous Vietnamese ragamuffins who made a profession of pimping and pick pocketing. First, they tried pimping. "Hey, Joe, you wanta girl?" Three kids at once asked, trying to grab their hands.

"No, beat it kids," Williard said avoiding the grasping little fingers. The kids worked together in teams. Unwary troopers on their first visit to Binh Hoa simply thought the kids were trying to be friendly by holding their hands and skipping happily along beside them, but as soon as both hands were secured by the friendly little rascals, a third would bump the trooper from behind and deftly lift his wallet.

"You want potty? Good stuff."

"Go find Junkman. He'll buy," Williard suggested.

"Junk? No junk. Number one stuff."

Williard tossed a few one-dollar script notes into the air. "Here we are," he said. While the kids were scrambling for the money, they



ducked into an alley, stepping dexterously to avoid strewn garbage and scurrying rats.

Past the alley, another narrow street came into view, lined with cinderblock and cement homes where the vice proprietors lived when not separating troops from their money. Williard knocked on a door. A pretty young woman in her twenties with long shiny black hair opened it.

"Willy! Heevy! Where you been!" She said, giving them both a huge hug.

"We been out in the boondocks treating the local Viet Cong," Williard said as the woman led them inside.

"Ah, you fix up Viet Cong, too! Why you do that?"

"It's only in passing. Besides, them grunts need clean bodies to count. It helps their morale."

"OK, numbuh one." She said, not understanding but willing to go along. She began digging in his pockets.

Another, younger woman appeared. She shook hands with Williard, then draped herself all over Heavy. She was in love with him, poor girl.

"Hey, Lovie," Heavy said to his girl, who was the other woman's younger sister. The women were partners with a couple of PX truck drivers who routinely stopped in Binh Hoa and dropped off a third of their loads of beer whenever they happened to be hauling any. That, of course was how Heavy had gotten involved with Lovie. Where beer was concerned, his instinct was unerring.

"What you got for us?" The other woman asked, fishing a bottle from Williard's pocket. She held it up appraisingly.

"Darvon Compound, Nellie," Williard said to his girl. Neither of their real names were pronounceable by Americans. He pulled another bottle of the same kind from another pocket. Both bottles still had good dates on them. He always tried to bring Nellie some useful gift.

"What it for?" Nellie said.

"For Dau. Good for all kinds of Dau." Dau was the supportive term for any kind of pain.



"Is good for pig?"

"Pig?"

"Sure. Pig. Him got dau in foots. Come on, I show you."

Curious, Williard let himself be led through the back door and into a small yard. A huge old sow lay on her side in the mud, suckling piglets. She was so old that her joints were knobby with arthritis.

"Him squeal when him try to get up. Dau in foots," Nellie reiterated.

"You want me to doctor a fucking pig?"

"Sure thang. Him no get up, him get sick."

Williard was amused. He smiled for the first time since the previous day. "What the hell, I been treating the Viet Cong, I guess treating a pig ain't much worse." He estimated the weight of the sow, shook out a handful of Darvon tablets and mixed them into a paste with a banana. He placed the nostrum into a pan and set it down in front of the sow. She gobbled it up.

"Give it a couple hours to work and we'll check back on her." *Jesus, next thing you know I'll be doctoring water buffaloes* , he thought.

Satisfied, Nellie led him back into her home. Heavy had already disappeared with Lovie into one of the curtained off bedrooms where Williard could overhear him alternately guzzling Millers, the latest consignment from the PX drivers, and alternating this with trying to induce Lovie to give him a blowjob. Every time they visited the sisters, he used a different approach. This time he tried to convince her by telling how much Angie, his nurse friend liked it. Nellie was having none of it. Shortly after meeting her, Heavy, with a heavier than usual load on, had once suggested vaguely that he would like to marry a Vietnamese woman one day and Lovie was holding out on him just on the chance that he would. "You marry me first, then maybe you get blowjob," Lovie said, loud enough for Williard and Nellie to overhear.

"No maybe," Heavy said.

"OK, I promise," Lovie said.



"Number one," Heavy said. Two thunks followed, unlaced jungle boots being flung away.

"No, no, marry first."

"Ah, shit. Let's fuck, then," Heavy said.

"You numbuh ten, Heevy. Always fuckee, never give me money."

"Here," Heavy said. A thunk as he dropped his wallet.

"Numbuh one!" Lovie cried.

There goes my poker money, Williard thought. Nellie, whose real name was Bayienh something or other, began unlacing his jungle boots. He began undressing her. They departed to the other curtained alcove where he got his ashes hauled for the second time that week. A while later as they lay sweating together on the hard, thinly padded platform masquerading as a bed he heard a snuffling, slurping sound coming from the living area.

"What's that noise?" Williard asked. From beyond the curtain, he heard Heavy laugh and a gurgle of a beer can being emptied. More snuffling noises followed. He realized that he had been hearing the noises in the background for quite a while but had ignored them, being busy with other matters.

Nellie suddenly realized what the sounds were. "Aiiee! Heevy have him pig in house!" She yelled. She sprang naked from the pallet. Williard threw on his fatigues and pushed his feet into his jungle boots, not bothering to lace them, and followed her out into the living room.

Heavy was busy emptying cans of Millers into a pan on the floor, taking a third off the top each time for himself. The sow, arthritis miraculously cured, slurped up each offering. The beer and Darvon together had a synergistic effect on the sow, more powerful than the sum of each added together. The sow raised its head and squealed, calling its piglets to chow.

"No, no!" Nellie said. "Pig no belong in house."

"OK," Heavy said, grabbing the sow by the ear. "I'll feed her outside. Jeez, she likes beer better than I do."

The sow squealed again, pivoting away from the painful tugging



on its ear. Heavy, unsteady on his feet, fell over her. Instinctively, he grabbed the other ear and suddenly found himself straddling the sow like a cowboy. The piglets burst through the back door, answering their mother's call. The sow, no longer interested in feeding her progeny, galloped out the front door, Heavy astride her. She was so huge that his feet barely touched the ground. The piglets doubled their speed, trying to catch up. Williard ran after them, leaving the two women behind as they suddenly realized they were both naked. They ran for their clothes.

Williard chased after Heavy and his sow, but with her arthritis cured, she made a clean escape, down the alley and out onto the main drag. The piglets, suddenly frightened by all the whoops and hollers from startled Vietnamese hookers and vendors and drunken troopers, scattered in all directions like greased pigs at a kids' rodeo. The locals began chasing them, visions of suckling pig dancing in their heads like sugarplums. The troopers in the street yelled advice to Heavy.

"Ride 'em cowboy!"

"Drive her to the chowhall!"

"Get a saddle!"

Heavy, getting into the game, let go of one ear and waved his fatigue hat over his head as if he were the star buckaroo in a rodeo. The sow turned a corner, almost pitching him off. He let go of his hat and grabbed the sow's ear again, causing it to squeal some more as his fatigue hat came loose and landed squarely over its snout and covered its eyes. It squealed and galloped through the door of a bar and crashed into a spread of tables, losing its footing. Heavy tumbled off, turned a flip and landed miraculously upright on a barstool as neatly as an Olympic gymnast. He plucked a beer from the astounded bartender's hand and guzzled it down. Unfortunately, he had ridden the sow into a bar staked out by black troopers, who didn't take kindly to a honkey riding a pig the size of a small horse into their domain. A huge black Special Forces grunt plucked Heavy from the barstool by his collar and the seat of his pants and carried him outside. Since Heavy only weighed about 130 pounds, the Special Forces trooper had no trouble at all. It might have ended there, but Heavy, struggling in the huge trooper's grasp, got a hand on his green beret and pulled it from his head. When the trooper flung him down into a mud puddle, the beret landed squarely in the middle of the muddy water. "You honky motherfucker! You got my hat dirty!" The trooper yelled, bending down to pick up his beret.



Williard, just arriving on the scene, saw Heavy being flung to the ground. When the trooper bent over to recover his beret, Williard thought he was threatening Heavy with more bodily harm. He charged the big trooper just as he was rising up with his dripping beret in hand. Williard bounced off his muscled body as if he had hit a brick wall and landed in the mud puddle, too. Heavy, being too drunk to realize what was happening, got to his feet. The trooper grabbed him again by his shirtfront and flung him into the puddle on top of Williard. Heavy struggled to his feet again and was just as promptly redeposited in the muddy water. Williard got to his feet, laughing and dripping.

"You're laughing at me," the huge black Green Beret said. He crushed Williard's hat down over his eyes and drew back a fist not much smaller than a bowling ball. In the meantime, the sow had regained her feet. She charged out of the bar, hitting the Special Forces trooper in the back. He fell and splashed face-first into the mud puddle, just as Heavy regained his feet for the third time.

"Let's get out of here!" Williard yelled, grabbing Heavy by the arm. They raced away, following the path being cleared by the revived sow. The Green Beret brushed muddy water from his eyes and gave chase, fire in his eyes and mayhem on his mind.

"Taxi!" Williard yelled, darting in front of a scooter, bringing it to a screeching halt. He boosted Heavy aboard and flung a handful of piasters at the driver. "Long Binh, quick!"

The driver looked over his shoulder at the huge black apparition giving chase and did a wheelie getting the hell out of there, following the clear lane down the street which the runaway sow had provided. Once outside the environs of Binh Hoa, they began to breathe easier.

"Let's stop for a beer," Heavy said.

"OK," Williard agreed. "I guess we may as well. I doubt we'll be welcome back at the sisters for a while."

"No sweat. I think I'm going to stop off and spend the night with Angie anyway. I'll catch a scooter back in the morning for sick call. OK?"

"Ain't you had enough excitement for one day?"

"You ain't never had one of Angie's blowjobs," Heavy said.



"OK. Say, while you're there, why don't you ask Angie to go see Major Burk and give him one, too? Maybe he'll forget about poker for a while."

"Sure, Sarge."

"Thanks, Heavy. If you do that, forget about that loan I gave you. If Angie can keep Burk away from the cards for a week, I could even turn a profit on the deal."

"No problem. Say, wait til I tell Tex about riding that pig. I bet he never done nothing like that in Texas!"

"None of us ever did things back in the world that we do over here," Williard reminded him as he sipped at a beer while Heavy chugalugged two down. He wondered if Heavy drank so much before coming to Vietnam. It was highly doubtful. The regular army didn't allow blatant drinking on the job but over here, it didn't seem to matter so long as a person could function.

He drained the last of his beer while Heavy snagged another and dropped it in his fatigue pocket just in case he got caught short before Angie got off duty.

"Heavy, how in hell are you going to act when you get back to the world?" Willard said. "Or for that matter, what would you do here if I weren't around to cover your ass?"

Heavy patted the beer in his pocket. "Beats me, Sarge. Why, are you going somewhere?"

"Not that I know of, but it's always a possibility."

"I'll worry about it then," Heavy said.

That's the problem, Williard thought. No one over here seems to think about the future. It's like this is all the world there is. The Vietnamese are all after American dollars and the Americans are all after pussy and booze and schemes to line their own pockets. Except for the lowly grunts, of course. Those poor bastards always get the short end of the stick.

Chapter Twelve



"Say, Sarge, when are you going to check out Vung Tau for me?" Captain Duarez asked Williard late the next morning. He had called Duarez in to ask his advice about a patient, a young trooper who continually appeared at sick call complaining of back problems no matter how much exercise he prescribed. X-Rays had shown nothing to indicate an injury and Williard was puzzled.

"Just as soon as we figure out what this young hero's problem is and Heavy and Junkman recover from FUO," Williard said. "You got any idea what's wrong here? I got to admit I'm puzzled." He pointed to a fresh X-Ray hanging on the view box. Williard didn't mind consulting with either of the doctors when he was truly at a loss. Occasionally, they even gave good advice, though not very often.

"Have they got FUO again?" Duarez said. He peered at the film.

"Yeah, Heavy caught a good dose of it in Binh Hoa yesterday and Junkman caught it again when we all left him here by himself. Before I forget, you better sign these duty excuses for them."

"I just signed off on both of them last week."

"No, that was the week before. Captain Harkness did it last week. It's your turn again."

"Oh. Well, hand 'em over. Just make sure you check out Vung Tau for me." Duarez scribbled on the two RX forms, wondering if their FUO would ever be cured.

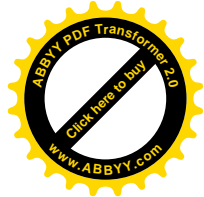
Duarez couldn't find anything physically wrong with the back-achy trooper either, which made Williard upset for consulting with him in the first place. Anytime he called on either of the doctors' expertise, he felt it detracted from his own knowledge. They agreed to send him to the field hospital for a consult.

"When are you flying out?" Duarez asked.

"I'm not. I've cut a deal with one of the SEAL teams for me to ride down river with them."

"You're not taking Heavy with you, are you? God, you might never get back. You'd be pulling him out of the river five times a day."

"I'm going by myself, but don't sell Heavy short. If he can ride a pig, he can ride a boat."



"What does a pig have to do with a boat?" Duarez asked, puzzled. He hadn't heard about the episode in Binh Hoa.

"It's a complicated relationship. Sign off on this here private's records and I'll drive him in to the hospital in the cracker box. I'll have to see major Burk to get some orders cut for Vung Tau."

Duarez signed and went away muttering. Boat? Pig? Williard's ways were mysterious, but he did get things done. Maybe he had misjudged the man. He stopped at the hooch to let Harkness know that Williard had set up his Vung Tau trip, unable to resist regaling his commander about the topless beaches he might soon be visiting. Harkness wasn't interested. He had something both topless and bottomless right in his hooch to play with.

Junie listened to the conversation with pretended disinterest. That night she made another trip to see Nguyen Nguyen. She picked up a bottle of root wine along the way, thinking that was his preferred drink.

Nguyen Nguyen accepted the weird bottle of homemade wine with ill grace, though he did manage to hold his temper.

"What is it this time, Tienh?"

"I have just heard that the medical sergeant is going to Vung Tau on the next river patrol boat," Junie said.

"May he fall in the river and drown," Nguyen said.

"He wants to send one of the doctors to Vung Tau. Is that important?"

"How should I know? It is impossible to figure the significance of the move when a sergeant can decide to re-assign an officer. No wonder we can never figure out what the Americans will do next."

"Will you kill the sergeant this time, commander?" Junie asked. Secretly, she was glad he had escaped the trap at the village. She was beginning to like him.

"That is not for you to know. Thank you, Tienh. You may go now." Nguyen Nguyen dismissed his agent and opened the bottle she had brought. Root wine, of all the beverages he detested most. He took a sip and coughed, thinking he might be drinking the vile stuff for the rest of the war after missing his chance to wipe out a whole



squad of American medics. His commander hadn't been pleased. Ah well, there was an ammunition boat going downriver soon. He could arm it more heavily than usual and hope for better results if it's voyage collided with the sergeant's boat.

Major Burk was happy and smiling when Williard entered his office.

"You look like a man who has just gotten his ashes hauled," Williard said, plopping down into his usual seat.

"Fucking-A," Major Burk smirked. "Say, what did you tell Heavy to say to Angie, anyway?"

"He probably told her what fun it is to ride a pig and get chased by a grunt who had just fallen into a mud puddle. That probably stimulated her imagination."

"I hope to shout. Well, what can I do for you today, Sarge?"

"I want to make a little run down to Vung Tau and need some orders cut," Williard said.

"Vung Tau? Hell, everyone wants to go to Vung Tau. Can I go with you?"

"It's fine by me, so long as the SEAL captain says it's OK. He's the one driving the boat."

"Um, maybe another time," Major Burk said. He had heard about the SEAL teams. If there was anything he didn't want to do, it was take off in a boat with a bunch of grunts looking for a fight. "How much time do you need and what justification can I use?"

"The boat captain is short his medic. He's on R & R in Hong Kong. Give me three days. I told Captain Duarez I'd try to find a slot for him down there."

"Is he giving you trouble?"

"Nope, but he ain't doing nothing else either. I can spare him."

"So can I, for that matter, but I can't spare you. You be careful, hear?" Major Burk called a clerk in and instructed him to cut the orders for Williard. While they waited, Major Burk happened to



glance out the window at the parked cracker box. At first he thought it was just mud-spatters on the upper corner of the boxy back end of the ambulance, then he noticed the glint of metal. He looked closer.

"Sarge, what happened to your cracker box? It looks as if it has bullet holes in it."

"Oh yeah. We got banged up a little on my last medcap. No big deal."

"It will be if the colonel sees them."

"Oh shit, I forgot about the colonel. You better go hurry that clerk up and let me get out of here before he shows up." Damn. In the back of his mind, Williard knew that he had left the bullet holes alone as sort of a trophy to show that the medics had been in combat. Now he realized he should have gotten them fixed before taking the ambulance off the compound.

Burk went to see his clerk. Williard stared out the window. An eagled figure emerged from the other side of the cracker box. *Oh shit*. Williard practically levitated out of the office, snatching the just completed orders from Burr's hand on the way. He raced up to where Colonel Pinkerton was bending over with a hand held pressure gauge, checking the tires. He screeched to a halt and snapped to attention right next to Pinkerton where his head and shoulders were in front of the bullet holes. "Good afternoon, sir!" He said loudly, throwing up a snappy salute.

Pinkerton jerked upright. "Oh. Hello sergeant. Where did you come from?" He eyed Williard suspiciously, like a detective scrutinizing a suspect.

"I was just reporting in to Major Burk, sir, on some dispensary business." He sidestepped to keep his body between Pinkerton and the bullet holes.

"That can wait," Pinkerton said, continuing his inspection of the ambulance. He bent over another tire then stood back up.

"Sir?" Williard sidestepped again, bending his body at an angle to keep it between the colonel and the holes in the ambulance.

"I said your other business can wait. Your left front tire is two pounds short on pressure. Say, why are you standing so funny. Is something wrong with your back?" The detective smelled guilt on the suspect.



Williard thought rapidly. "I can't help it sir. I strained my back this morning twisting the radiator cap on the ambulance before I started out." He rubbed his back and grimaced, like an old man with arthritis.

"Is that so? Maybe I had better check that cap. There may be something wrong with it."

"Would you sir? I don't think I better try it again."

Pinkerton walked around to the driver's side with Williard following as closely as a kitten that hadn't seen its mother in two days. He reached inside and popped the hood latch.

"Let me help, sir," Williard said. He raised the hood. "Ouch! My back."

"I'll just be a second," Pinkerton said. He twisted the radiator cap off and held it up to the light as if he were eyeing the faucets of a rare jewel. He rubbed off a drop of fluid then replaced it.

Williard let down the hood, letting out another little pain noise.

"Are you sure you can drive effectively, sergeant? I wouldn't want you having an accident. We have to keep our vehicles rolling you know."

"I'll manage, sir. Besides, I better get right over to the motor pool and get that tire aired up."

The detective decided to let the miscreant go for now, being sure he would have him back in the lineup again before much time had passed. "See that you do, and don't let this happen again," Pinkerton said. He thought of asking Major Burk to discipline the sergeant for the low tire pressure but thought better of it. Two pounds was right at the lower limit of allowable deviation and the sneaky sergeant would probably know that. He took Williard's salute, returned it, and headed toward Major Burr's office. Just as he was about to enter the building, he remembered that he had forgotten to check the oil pressure. That business of the radiator cap had distracted him. He turned to take care of it but Williard was already driving away, glad that he didn't have to deal with the vehicle-crazy colonel on a regular basis like Burk did.

Seconds later, Pinkerton was inside Major Burr's office, face red and waving his oil rag. "Major! I just saw Sgt. Williard drive away



from here without checking his oil level first. What do you think about that?"

"I checked it for him when he drove in, Colonel," Major Burk said, thinking quickly. He pulled out his own oil rag to show the colonel. He had begun carrying it as a matter of course, believing in the old adage that imitation was the sincerest form of flattery.

"Well, what if his ambulance suddenly developed an oil leak while it was just sitting there? What did he want, anyway?"

"He needed some orders to fill in for a missing medic on one of the river boats for a couple of days. You do know how important their patrols are, don't you, sir? As long as charlie is shooting at the boats, that's just that many more who aren't aiming for our vehicles."

"Right," Colonel Pinkerton agreed. "You're really getting to know your business in this war. Can I check the oil in your jeep so long as I'm here?"

"Certainly, sir. You never know what those men in the motor pool might overlook."

Williard aired up the under-inflated tire then drove the ambulance directly back to the compound and turned it over to a motor pool mechanic who was adept at body work. After that, he looked up Heavy and Junkman. He was a little apprehensive about leaving the dispensary to operate without him for three whole days. He instructed Junkman and Heavy the rest of the evening, foregoing his usual trip to the club. After that, he went to take a shower.

It was only recently that the compound had gotten heat for their bathing water. The showers were dispensed from a huge metal tank erected on a scaffold. Major Hollis had freed up a couple of tanker drivers long enough to have them rig a kerosene pressure torch beneath the water tank. The only problem was, the showers were always either too hot or too cold depending on how high on what substance the torch operators were. The operator had to sit by the torch and depend on shouts and curses from the naked men beneath to gauge the temperature. Tonight it was too hot. The only way to bathe was by sticking a washcloth briefly into the steaming water, then let it cool down.

"Too hot!" The bathers shouted; Williard included.



"Hotter? You want it hotter?" The spaced out torch operator asked. He turned up the heat.

"Too hot, goddamnit!"

"I'm trying, goddamnit!" The operator yelled. He turned up the torch some more with one hand and toked on a bomber with the other.

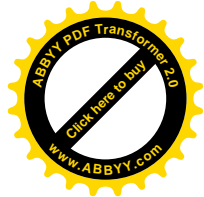
"Yeoww! You're scalding us you crazy bastard. Turn it down!" Williard shouted, dropping his steaming washcloth.

"I'm coming down!" The operator said, still misunderstanding the shouting curses. "Just hold your horses." He began descending the scaffold, intending to replenish the torch's kerosene supply so that he could get more heat to the water. Unfortunately, he only used one hand to support himself, the other being busy with his bomber. He slipped and fell the last few feet, knocking a water pipe loose. The scalding water began running out on the ground. That was all the showers for that night.

Williard noticed smoke curling up from the bomber the torch operator had been smoking before he fell. He cursed and ground it out under his boot heel, then returned to the hooch still dirty. If this war keeps on, he thought, the army isn't going to be fit to kick a dog's ass. And I guess I'm part of the problem, too, he admitted honestly, letting Heavy and Junkman fuck off so much with their booze and pot.

Williard had Captain Duarez drive him to the river the next morning, leaving Captain Harkness behind in case Junkman or Dum-Dum needed any help, which they probably would. Heavy was going to be useless. He had been so wiped out the evening before that he stood in the scalding shower water too long before realizing how hot the water was and had gotten second degree burns on his shoulders. He didn't remember what caused them, of course. When Williard had told him what had happened the next morning, he was inspecting his mattress to see if he had set it on fire with a cigarette, but it was innocent. Shrugging, he took an armful of beer and retired to his bunk, off duty for a day or two. Williard knew that Dum-Dum and Junkman were both basically good men, but some problems just required experience to handle. Anyway, he would review all the records when he got back.

The boat captain was a heavily muscled chief petty officer named Smith who was almost as good as Sgt. Williard for making use of unnecessary supplies. Although his stated duties were to patrol the river and intercept Viet Cong traffic, he had a couple of regular stops



to make first, which took up most of the day. At several of the small riverside villages, he unloaded odd packages of C-Rations such as corned beef hash or Chicken succotash that no trooper in his right mind would eat, leather boots and arctic gear which had somehow found its way into the country and various other mundane supplies. Williard didn't bother to ask what arctic gear was doing in Viet Nam. Civilian contractors had their ways. He was mildly curious about what use the villagers, or more likely, the Viet Cong had for them, but he let that go, too. In a war zone, anything was grist for the black market. So far as he could tell, anyone who wasn't dealing just hadn't had the opportunity yet.

CPO Smith took his pay in piasters, cases of the local beer, and finally a boat wash while he and his men were getting their ashes hauled. Williard declined an invitation to do the same. He guarded the boat while it was being cleaned up. He passed out a few packs of Winstons to the washers to keep them from pilfering items not for sale, such as machine guns, rifles and RPG's, rocket propelled grenades. At dusk, the regular patrol began.

Smith placed Williard on a bench behind the machine gunner. "You just sit here, Doc. If we run into any action, hit the deck. We'll take care of it."

That didn't suit Williard. It struck him as if he were an unwanted little brother brought along on a date and told to sit down and be quiet. "Why couldn't I help?"

"We hit some action, maybe there's some wounded. That's your job," Smith said.

Well, that did make sense, though he still didn't like it. He settled himself into a comfortable position and thought that he probably wouldn't be able to hit anyone in the dark with a forty-five pistol anyway, even if there were some action. He contented himself with a fantasy of the Vung Tau beaches, where rumor had it that on one isolated stretch of it the nurses and Red Cross girls sometimes went topless.

As they got underway, the machine gunner explained to Williard that any boat found on the river at night was presumed to be the enemy hauling supplies or troops until proven innocent.

"How do you tell the difference?" He asked.

"If they shoot at you, it's the bad guys," the machine gunner grinned. "Hey, you need some grease on your face. Hold still."



Williard let him apply black greasepaint to his face while the chief got the boat moving.

Smith let the boat drift almost silently downriver, engine barely idling. Whenever another craft was sighted, which was rare, he revved up the engine and one of his machine gunners fired tracer rounds across its bow. If the fire wasn't returned, he guided his boat over for an inspection. The lack of traffic on the river made for a long night but just before dawn, they got return fire, not only from the enemy craft but from the riverbank, too. Junie had done her work well. The noise split the still night like a fourth of July celebration, waking Williard, who had dozed off. He opened his eyes in time to see tracer rounds appear to curve into the bow of the boat as Smith gunned the engine into overdrive. The bullets raked down the armored side of the boat, sounding like a crazed riveter hopped up on amphetamines. The ambush had been well laid.

"Get them bastards!" Smith yelled over the noise.

Williard fell to the deck as he had been instructed to do. He gripped the pistol in his shoulder holster, ready to pull it if he had to. Smith seemed to be pointing the bow of the boat right toward where the tracers were coming from. The rest of the crew except for the machine gunner was firing their rifles. He was letting off measured bursts from his weapon. The cacophony of sounds washed over Williard like a physical force. He hugged the deck, digging his fingernails into the wooden planks, as scared as he had ever been in his life. A voice cried out above him and a heavy weight tumbled down on top of him, knocking the breath from his body. For a moment, he thought the Viet Cong had boarded the boat then he realized that the machine gunner must have been hit.

Williard crawled out from under the body. At first, he thought the man was dead, but then he sat up, gripping his left arm and grunting with pain. Williard reached for his medical kit. Blood was pouring from the machine gunner's arm, a dark stream barely visible in the moonlight. He began binding it up. Broken bones grated together with a sound like ripping cardboard.

"Never mind me, take the gun!" The wounded man gasped. Williard hadn't fired a machine gun since basic training, but he still remembered how. He got to his feet and locked his hands in the trigger grips and began firing at the enemy boat. In the beginning, his aim was thrown off by involuntary flinching as machine gun bullets and rifle fire tore into the sides and superstructure of the boat. He gritted his teeth and tried to hold still while he fired back at the approaching craft. A wild thought came into his head that they were



still close enough to Long Binh that this enemy group probably belonged to the local contingent who never had been noted for shooting straight. Just as quickly, he changed his mind as a cluster of high pitched buzzing noises hummed past his ears, sounding like swift angry bees. The tracers from his bucking gun converged on those coming from the enemy boat. Just as the belt of cartridges on his machine gun ran dry, the Viet Cong craft went up in a tremendous explosion. The blast wave knocked him backwards. Dazed, he rolled over and got to his hands and knees. Fire from the riverbank tapered off, then died out completely. The engine of their boat began coughing. He heard Smith curse. Williard shook his head, trying to get the ringing sound out of his ears, then again began binding up the wounded SEAL, his hands sure and practiced even in the darkness, broken only by wan moonlight. He tied the ends of the bandage and injected the wounded man in the thigh with a morphine syrette. The syrette didn't want to let go when he tried to toss it away. His hands were sticky with blood.

"Who's hit?" Smith called, then cursed again as he played with the engine, trying to keep it running.

"Just me, Smitty," the wounded sailor said weakly. "The Doc's got me fixed up. Say, he done good with my gun."

"Them fucking gooks done good, too," Smith said. "We got engine trouble. We ain't never going to make Vung Tau this trip. Sorry, Doc."

"Don't worry about it," Williard said. "We need to get this man here evaced. His arm is damn near shot off. Call for a dustoff."

"Can't call," Smith said. "They got the radio, too. I'm heading back." He nursed the motor and began chugging upriver, back in the direction they had come from. On the riverbank, Nguyen Nguyen pounded his fist into the dirt, cursing all Americans in general and one sergeant in particular.

A few hours later they arrived and Williard had the Dock crew call for a dust off, a medical helicopter to transport the wounded crewman to a field hospital. Williard stayed with the casualty until the chopper set down, and then began hitching a ride back to his compound, tired, sleepy and adrenaline-depleted. He wondered how Jason managed to fly every day if this was what combat was like.

While Williard had his thumb out, CPO Smith wrote up his battle report, noting Williard's participation. Eventually, it went to his commander, to his commander's commander and another copy



was forwarded sideways to General Ware, the commander in charge of all the medical services in Vietnam. The general read the report with interest then put it in a special file he was building. The general, an old mustang up from the ranks, kept hearing stories about Sgt. Williard. Eventually, he would have to do something about him.

"That was a quick trip," Captain Duarez said later that morning, spotting Williard dragging into the dispensary where sick call was almost over. "Did you find me a slot in Vung Tau?"

"We never made it to Vung Tau. Engine trouble. Sorry, Doc. I'll try again another time." Williard was too enervated to explain further. He trudged into the dispensary without another word.

Duarez's previous rapport with the sergeant dissolved like wind-blown smoke. He didn't believe a word of it. He suspected that Williard never even intended to go to Vung Tau in the first place, rather using that as an excuse for some nefarious excursion of his own. He was sorely upset, having already primed himself for an assignment to the best playground in the whole country. Sgt. Williard went back on his list right then. He would have to be careful, though. He knew that Williard's tentacles extended into the most unlikely places. Before he went to see Colonel Pinkerton again, he would have to have some hard information. When he did, and if he could just remember to be seen checking the oil level in his jeep before reporting to him, something positive might be accomplished.

Williard was so sleepy that he failed to note the disappointment evident on Duarez's face. He was even more short than usual with the last few men on sick call, especially since there was only one interesting case to be seen. This was a scared young private who had stopped by a truck wash located along the riverbank on the way back from delivering his fuel the previous evening. While waiting for his tanker truck to be washed, he decided to clean some of the road dust off by taking a swim in the river. Being somewhat of a modest young man, he left his underwear on while he swam and never noticed the leech that crawled up inside his shorts and fastened its raspy mouth to his scrotum. As usual, he was exhausted from the daylong drive, and since he had washed in the river, he skipped showering that night. The next morning while getting dressed, he looked down and saw what looked like a third testicle attached below his penis. The leech had gorged happily all night and was swelled up to almost bursting. The private let out a horrible scream and ripped the leech off, squashing it in the process. Blood sprayed everywhere. The leech, following its own blind instincts, had injected an enzyme into



its point of attachment on the private's scrotum. The enzyme prevented blood from coagulating and enabled the leech to feed, unhampered by the normal clotting mechanism of the human body. Once ripped loose, blood continued to flow.

There was only one treatment Williard knew to resolve the bleeding. He said to the purely frightened private, "Son, the only way to stop you from bleeding to death is to keep pressure on the wound. Get up on this here cot."

Once the private was stretched out on his back, Williard handed him a bundle of gauze sponges. "Take these and hold them on your balls until the enzyme that the leech injected into you wears off. It may take a while."

Williard really intended to check back on the private later on, but lack of sleep caught up with him. His nap went on and on, beyond the time he normally took after noon chow. Captain Duarez found the private there several hours later, still clutching a bundle of gauze to his testicles in a near death grip, although by that time the bleeding had long since stopped. He let the private get up at last and get dressed, then sent him off with some bacitracin ointment and a jock strap.

When Williard finally woke up and remembered to check on his patient, he found that he was already gone. Puzzled, he searched for the man's chart and finally found it lying on his desk with a notation from Captain Duarez entered in it. "Dumb shit," he remarked to himself. Bacitracin might be the post-treatment of choice if there were a likelihood of infection present, but he knew there was little chance of that with all the outward flow of blood washing away infectious organisms. A & D ointment would have been a better option. It promoted healing much faster. Nevertheless, he was provoked with himself for oversleeping and leaving his patient alone after his scrotum had stopped bleeding. Well, he could have him called back in first thing the next morning. Right now, the club was opened and he needed a drink. He also needed to do some thinking. Two episodes of combat in just a few days had him wondering about his own motivations.

Chapter Thirteen



Sgt. Williard was getting more tired than ever of routine sick call, especially after the excitement of the last few days. This morning he had to do what little lab work was needed as Heavy was still indisposed.

The morning drug by slowly, lightened only by one interesting case, a corporal with a combat infantryman's insignia sewed to the left breast of his fatigue jacket. The former infantryman, who had been seen by both Harkness and Duarez the day before, was back again at Williard's request. He presented scaling, peeling skin on both hands, which the Docs had treated with a cortisone salve. Williard didn't agree with them. It didn't resemble any fungus infection he had ever seen, but just to be on the safe side, he took some skin scrapings and prepared a KOH prep, getting it right the first time, whereas Heavy usually took two or three tries, especially the first thing in the morning when his trembling hands weren't really up to fine coordination. The slide was negative, except for some unidentified black blobs. He examined those closely then went back to question the corporal some more.

"Tell me what you been doing lately," he said to the trooper. The black balls of goo he had seen on the slide resembled nothing so much as bits of grease.

"This is my week for guard duty. I handle the M-30 machine gun, you know, like for backup fire if the guards get into a real sniping contest with charlie."

"Have you had a chance to fire back yet?" Williard asked, thinking of his own recent experience with a machine gun.

"Naw, Doc, I only been in country a few weeks. I've been ready, though. Give me a chance and I'll really zap some of those little bastards. I ain't like most of these guys on guard here. They ain't no real grunts. Besides, they're usually so tired from driving or so high or drunk on that junk they pick up at the truck washes that they couldn't tell a Viet Cong from a vitamin pill. Half the time they're shooting at monkeys instead of charlie."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," Williard said, more sympathetic to the troopers complaint than he would have been a couple of days earlier. "Let's get back to your hands, though. I bet you use a good solvent when you clean that MG don't you?"

"You bet, Doc. I clean it two or three times a day. I don't want to take a chance on it misfiring."



**"I guess you keep it greased up all the time, too, don't you?"
Now he was closing in on a diagnosis.**

"You bet, Doc. I oil it up real good. Lots of oil."

"That's fine. Very commendable, in fact. I guess you have to use lots of soap and water to clean that gunk off your hands afterwards, don't you?"

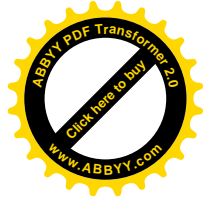
"Sure, Doc. I wash up right before chow."

Now he had it. "Well, son, in the future, I suggest you wash up right after cleaning your weapon in addition to before you eat. What you got here is skin burns from leaving that solvent and oil on your hands too long. Here, I'll even give you some soap." Williard passed over a couple of bars of granny's old lye soap that had come from deep within the Big Thicket of east Texas. He wondered idly how the old woman had gotten his address and was glad he had finally found a use for her contribution to the war effort. Now he just hoped the cure wouldn't turn out to be worse than the disease. Whatever, the corporal only had a couple more days of guard duty before going back to driving his tanker and this would be a good test for the lye soap. According to legend, it would clear up anything on the outer portion of the body, if for no other reason than it removed the top layer of epidermis and all organisms residing there.

Williard was glad now that he had come back early from the aborted trip to Vung Tau. If he hadn't, the medical officers would probably have sent the corporal in to the field hospital for a barrage of tests and embarrassed the whole dispensary.

The rest of the morning presented only the usual cases of clap, coughs, skin problems and backaches. The only exception was a case of hemorrhoids caused by constant sitting as the driver bounced his tanker over bumpy, potholed roads. They were so bad that the protruding tissue looked like a cluster of leeches attached to the trooper's anus. Fortunately, Dum-Dum said he had just the thing for them, a special concoction of his own devising, consisting of an astringent compounded of alum, sharkskin oil, hydrocortisone and a butylated cream to hold the ingredients into a semi-solid mass, guaranteed to either scare hemorrhoids back where they came from or simply dry the whole mess up into something that could be snipped off with a pair of surgical scissors.

The day wasn't over after the final patient, though. Periodically, the officer in charge of hiring Vietnamese mess workers brought a new batch in for testing before food service certificates



could be issued to them. Regulations called for them to be tested for parasites and to have a STS, serological test for syphilis, performed. Parasite testing was easy. He just didn't test them, since they all had parasites anyway. He just treated them with enough anti-helminthics and powerful antibiotics to flush away whatever worms or amoebas they were carrying. There was no getting away from the STS, though. The hiring officer insisted, even though Williard had tried to convince him that syphilis was transmitted by more intimate forms of contact than stirring a pot of beans or scouring pots and pans.

To perform an STS, a vial of blood had to be drawn, always an intricate exercise in the power of coercion for each individual woman. Almost all the compound workers were female since their men folk were busy growing rice when not out carrying a rifle for the local Viet Cong. The reason for the problem with drawing blood was that somehow an idea had grown up in the indigenous culture that blood, once lost, could never be replaced. Since most of the women were anemic anyway, the idea did have an element of truth to it. It took a lot of convincing to allow the women to have blood drawn, especially since Heavy always wanted three times as much as was needed for the test in case he burned up the serum while heating it to inactivate complement, a blood protein which interfered with the test.

That afternoon, more than a dozen scared young women were herded into the front of the dispensary and held there by the food service officer, then only one at a time was led to the back of the dispensary to the lab. Since Williard was the second best medic with a syringe after Heavy, when he wasn't totally wiped out, that is, he performed that part of the operation. He kept toothless on hand to help since he never had much to do otherwise.

Williard sat the first young woman down in the blood drawing seat and attached a tourniquet around her upper arm.

"Tie Tie!" She implored, the word for a small amount of anything, in this case blood.

"Sure, tie tie," Williard agreed, deftly sliding the needle into a vein. "Watch her, toothless."

As quickly as the first stream of blood appeared in the end of the syringe, the girl made a grab for it, attempting to pull the syringe out while the tourniquet was still attached.

"Damnit, hold her, Toothless!" Williard exclaimed, pulling back hurriedly on the plunger of the syringe, getting a few cc's of blood into the barrel before the excited girl overpowered Toothless and ripped



the syringe from her arm. Blood flowed from the puncture before he could rip off the tourniquet and apply cotton to the wound.

"Beau ceau, you numbah ten. No Tie tie like you say!" The girl cried, pressing the cotton onto the inside of her elbow. Beau ceau was the old French term for a whale of a lot. Williard wiped off the escaped stream of blood running down her forearm.

"Goddamnit, if you'd fucking hold still, you wouldn't of lost so much." He sent her out the back way so that she wouldn't have contact with the others waiting up front, out of hearing. "Go get the next one, Toothless, and damnit, hold tighter this time."

"I'd rather be pulling teeth," Toothless said.

"You're going to lose some teeth if you don't hold on next time." Williard was exasperated with the whole useless operation.

"I already lost them all, remember? I got dentures now." Toothless said.

"You better hang on to them. They ain't making dentures in country yet. You lose them, you're going to have a hell of a time gumming army chow for the next six months. It's hard enough eating it with teeth."

Toothless did a better job on the rest of the girls, only losing his grip once or twice when particularly loud screams of "Beau ceau! Beau ceau!" unnerved him and the girl ripped the syringe out of her arm.

Williard was bloody and his back hurt from all the bending, despite all the running he and Heavy did, before the operation was finished. He bundled up the tubes of hard won blood and stored them in Heavy's blood cooler after appropriating a couple of beers to make room.

He was sitting at his desk, drinking a beer and writing up charts when the phone rang. He was still pissed off. He wished he were an officer with enough power to deep six some of the chickenshit, out-dated regulations career officers seemed prone to keep on the books forever and ever.

"Dispensary. Sgt. Williard." He growled, hoping it was someone he could unload his anger on.

"You mean you're still a sergeant? The army must be hard up if



they haven't busted you down to private yet." Williard recognized the voice of his brother, Lieutenant Jason Williard, the marine corps F-4 pilot stationed at Chu Lai, far to the north. The rush of anger died. His face brightened.

"Hey, you officer puke! Don't worry about me. The whole medical corps over here might collapse if I wasn't running things. What's happening up at your end?"

"Jerry's ship is in port for a few days. He says he can get a couple of days off. Any chance you could get up this way?" Jerry was their other brother, an ensign on a destroyer which patrolled the coast, using its five-inch guns as artillery when fire missions were requested.

Williard considered. There might be a chance to arrange it. "Could be. Won't you be flying, though?"

"Naw, I've been grounded temporarily."

"Don't tell me. You got shot down again."

"Not this time. I was coming in from my last strike and did a victory roll over the field with the afterburners going. I took the hats right off a bunch of brass, then I got to laughing so hard at all them heavies chasing their headgear that I forgot to lower my landing gear when I came in. I don't think that plane is going to be good for much anymore."

"I can feel my taxes going up right now. You were flying drunk again, weren't you?"

"Not so's you could tell. It might help though, if you know anybody up here at the 4th Mobile Lab. That's where they sent the blood alcohol test they done on me."

"Brother, you're full of shit house luck. It happens that the NCOIC up there is an old friend of mine. I'll give him a call."

"Thanks, Jim. Try to get up, OK?"

"Look for me day after tomorrow at the latest. This is going to be tough, though. I'll have to see that fucking oil wiping colonel I told you about to get some orders cut."

"You'll manage. Hey, I got to go. There's this little honey I've got lined up for tonight since I'm not flying. Shit, I wish they'd ground



me every other week."

"It would sure save the government some money."

"They would lose money. I've turned more gomers into crispy critters than any one else in the squadron. That many less to fire their fucking rockets at our planes when we're on the ground. Hey, that reminds me, Jerry said he heard a rumor about some army sergeant named Williard that was out with a SEAL team and blew up one of Charlie's ammunition boats. Was that you?"

"Yeah. They sassed me and I got pissed off. Hey, let me make that call before that lab gets their reports out. Have fun with your honey."

"I will. 'By."

Williard was sure that he would. Jason's reputation was growing into a legend. He was the fightingest, fuckinkest, drinkinkest Marine Corps pilot since Pappy Boyington. Williard attributed it largely to the fact that he was a mustang, his officerly attributes modified by his previous experience as an NCO, always a good leavening for an officer. It was too bad Colonel Pinkerton and some other officers he could name didn't have the same background.

Williard called the Mobile laboratory up in Chu Lai and spoke briefly to his friend. His buddy assured him that the blood alcohol report on his brother would soon go back to his CO and report no trace of alcohol in his bloodstream. Williard made a note to see what he could do to return the favor sometime in the future then began making plans to beard Colonel Pinkerton in the Lion's den, brigade headquarters, the next morning. While planning, he went ahead and packed an AWOL bag with his shaving gear, a spare set of jungle fatigues and his forty five so that he wouldn't have to return to the compound. He already had an idea on how he could pull off the trip, if Colonel Pinkerton proved hard to manage. He set aside a couple of cases of soap to take along.

He hurried over to the officer's tent and told Harkness that he would probably be gone on an important mission for a few days.

"What important mission?" Harkness asked. Damn, Williard always seemed to be running off somewhere lately. He didn't like it. The last time he had almost sent a perfectly simple medical problem in to the field hospital. He and Duarez both had missed the obvious diagnosis.



"It's secret and I gotta go. Try to keep Heavy and Junkman functioning til noon every day."

"Damn it, Sarge--"

"Sorry, Doc. This won't wait." Williard brushed off any further objections and ran to get Dum-Dum to drive him over to brigade.

On the way, he remembered the last time he and Jason and Jerry had gotten together. Jerry had called from San Diego, telling that he had a two-week leave before shipping out for Southeast Asia. Jerry had flown to El Paso where he was running the night shift at Beaumont General Hospital while waiting for his request for duty in Vietnam to go through. From there, they had embarked in Williard's car through the mostly dry counties of West Texas where alcohol was prohibited. When they finally found a watering hole, they lit into the booze like thirsty kids gulping Kool-Aid. Sometime during the stopover, Williard called Jason, who was in a training squadron on the east coast and also waiting for orders to Vietnam, and induced him to request an emergency leave, the emergency being they anticipated using Jason's shit-house luck at poker to keep them supplied with cash during their revelries in Houston, their home.

They met there the next day and began a week of debauchery, spending Jason's winnings like drunken sailors, Jerry meeting the description both literally and figuratively.

Even their sisters came home to see the three brothers off to the war, but the prospective warriors weren't around most of the time, being usually drunk and spending most nights away from their parent's home. They did occasionally show up long enough to change clothes, eat and sweet-talk their mother into doing laundry and fixing a meal or two. It had been a memorable leave, something to remember, even if their sisters, mother and father did remind them whenever they were passably sober that they were mortal and subject to cirrhosis, jealous husbands and other ills normal people must suffer through. He just hoped this reunion would be as much fun and relieve as much tension as the last one had. Besides, when Jason wasn't occupied with booze and broads or flying he had a way of analyzing problems which always cut right to the meat of the matter with a simplicity and directness neither he nor Jerry possessed, and he wanted to ask his opinion about some matters bothering him.

Colonel Pinkerton wasn't immediately open to reason. "No way, Sergeant," he said, glad of a chance to stymie Williard for a



change.

"But, Colonel, sir, regulations state that where possible, family members in country should be allowed to visit with each other."

"I'm aware of that, Sergeant, but I'm afraid I need you here to supervise the maintenance of your vehicles. I'm afraid to leave them in charge of a lesser person." Feathers dripped from his mouth like a canary in full molt.

"I'm certain our vehicles would be properly maintained in my absence, sir. I've trained my men to follow all your guidelines. Your maintenance techniques have been truly inspirational to them." Williard rolled his tongue against his cheek and prayed for forgiveness for such a lie.

"That's fine, Sergeant and I'm glad to hear that my example is being followed in such an exemplary manner. Still, I think you had better remain here. Why, we almost lost you the other day when you were out cavorting with those river rats."

So, he would need the soap after all. On the other hand, maybe the colonel could be intimidated. "Well, if you say so, sir. I'll get on my way then. Oh. Sir, could you tell me if the brigade chaplain is on duty now? I think I need to stop and see him on my way back."

Pinkerton thought black thoughts. Chaplains had an inordinate amount of power in the army, and if Williard intended to go see him, it was certain that he was well connected there and intended to have him intervene. Besides, the chaplain was a friend of General Ware, the ultimate medical commander. It wouldn't do to aggravate him and possibly have him go to the general. He had a sudden inspiration.

"Just a moment, Sergeant Williard. Perhaps we can work something out. It happens that I need a courier right this moment, and it just so happens that most of my letters need to go to the Chu Lai area. Why don't you wait outside for a little while and I'll get a package together and have some orders cut. It won't tie up much of your time. You can deliver the letters as soon as you get there, then pick up the replies right before you leave. How would that be?"

"Sounds fine to me, sir. I'll wait right here."

Colonel Pinkerton had friends of his own up north, and he quickly wrote in postscripts to his missives, which really did need delivering, asking those officers to keep an eye on his courier and



watch for unregulated behavior. Sooner or later, Williard was bound to screw up, and a three-day party with his brother might be just the thing to bring him down. Of course, since his brother was an officer, whatever might happen would certainly not be his fault, even if he did have the mustang taint about him.

Williard picked up his orders and Pinkerton's missives an hour later. A quick call to the Binh Hoa Air Force Base got him on the manifest for a flight the same day. Since it was on his way, he decided to stop off and see if the chaplain was at his orphanage and drop off the soap, even if he didn't have to use it in return for a favor as he had thought he might. He walked over to the motor pool, showed his orders and got a jeep driver.

The chaplain spent a good deal of his time at the orphanage he had founded in Binh Hoa, and sure enough, Williard found him there.

Williard scattered some coins to a gang of well-scrubbed kids clustered around the entrance of an old two-storied building the chaplain had converted. He smiled happily as they wrestled and laughed over his spare change. At least these kids were safe from the war.

Inside, he met the chaplain hurrying from his office toward the door to see what the fuss was about. Lt. Col Fournoy was a short, chubby figure with thinning pink hair and cheeks as rosy as polished apples. Williard liked him, even though he had heard that he had joined the army under a cloud of some sort from his last civilian ministry. He admired Fournoy's devotion to the orphans and wished he could do more for him. Whenever he dropped by, he always left what money he could spare and a couple of cases of soap, knowing that Fournoy had no official funds to run the place or buy supplies with.

"Hi Jim," Fournoy said, his rosy cheeks crinkled in a big grin. "It's good to see you again. Is that soap you're carrying?"

"Sure is. How are the kids?"

"Oh, they are fine. Fine and happy. What brings you this way?"

"Just passing by and thought I'd drop off some soap for you."

"Thanks, Jim. I appreciate it. Do you have time for a drink?"

"Sorry, Chaplain, I'm in a hurry. Anything else I can bring you next time?"



"We can always use medicine, if you can spare any."

"No problem. Catch you later." Williard handed the soap to the chaplain and went on outside. As he was leaving, he spotted Ky, one of his favorites of the orphans. Ky was about ten years old, with creamy brown skin and delicate, almost Caucasian features set below a shock of shiny black hair. He usually kept a constant, happy grin on his face but today his mouth was set in a thin despondent line, as if someone had brought a bag of candy around and given everyone some but him.

"Hey, Ky! Where's that smile, son?" Williard said, wondering what was wrong with the boy.

Ky's lips trembled. He turned his head and shrank away, like a scared kitten trying to avoid a caress by a stranger. Williard knelt down beside the boy and put an arm around his shoulder. "Hey, what's wrong?"

The boy bowed his head and didn't answer. Williard put a finger under his chin and gently tipped it up. "Come on, tell Willy what's wrong. OK?"

Ky finally spoke, though his voice was barely above a whisper. "Me no like it here now. Me run away soon."

Williard was puzzled. The last time he had seen the little fellow he had seemed to like the orphanage. "Why don't you like it here now?"

"The chaplain, him bang-bang me. Me no like him no more. Number ten."

"Bang-bang?"

Ky put both hands over his buttocks. "Him bang-bang me here, like you Joes Bang-bang woman."

Oh, Goddamn, Williard thought, realizing what the boy was talking about. *The sonofabitch!* No wonder he spends so much time with the kids. He stood up, still holding one hand on the boy's shoulder. He turned back toward the entrance to the orphanage and caught a glimpse of a face with pink hair peering furtively at them through an upstairs window. He made a motion to go back inside and the face vanished. He glanced at his watch. No time now, but by God, I'll make time later, he thought. He turned back to the boy.



"Listen, Ky, don't run away. I don't think he will bother you again, at least right now." Williard hoped so after Fournoy had seen Ky demonstrating what had happened. "You stay here til I come back, OK?"

"OK. Him no bang-bang me, me stay. Him bang-bang again, me go."

"Number one." Williard pulled out his wallet and pressed some piaster notes into Ky's hand, just in case the boy did leave before he could help. "I have to go, Ky. You tell the chaplain that if he bothers you again, Sgt. Willy will get him. OK?"

A smile crept back over the boy's face. "I tell him. You number one, Willy."

Williard tousled the boy's face and glanced at his watch again. He had to get going.

On the way to the airport he seethed, running through several options he might use to have Fournoy thrown in Long Binh jail on child molestation charges. None of them were quite workable. A charge like that would be hard to prove, especially to Colonel Pinkerton, Fournoy's commanding officer. Pinkerton would laugh at a sergeant, especially himself, bringing charges against one of his officers. And even suppose he did succeed? What would happen to the kids then? Right now, they were well fed, clean and off the streets. If he did manage to have the chaplain thrown in jail it wouldn't be long before the kids were dispersed and back living in the alleys of Binh Hoa, having to steal and prostitute themselves in order to survive. Shit. Everywhere he looked, it seemed as if the rear area troops were more interested in their own agenda rather than getting on with the war. Including himself. No wonder it was taking so long to win.

I've gotta do something, he thought. I don't like this shit anymore. But what? He boarded his plane an hour later, still wondering.

Chapter Fourteen



The cross winds were very bad at Chu Lai and the cargo plane pilot kept circling and circling, making pass after pass but never landing. He bounced his craft up and down and back and forth in the air currents like an errant chip in a raging river. The engineering officer in the seat next to Williard who was just arriving in country slowly began turning green, making Williard wish his brother was up front at the controls. After a couple of passes, he would simply have aimed the nose of the craft at the runway and charged, challenging it to beat him. This pilot was chicken, though, and took ten passes before he got so low on fuel that he was forced to land. The plane hit with a bone-jarring thud, bounced, bounced again, then kept contact with the ground. The pilot reversed the props and trod on the brakes but didn't allow enough margin for the cross winds and ran off the runway. The plane tilted to one side as part of the landing gear sank into soft ground, rolled a few more feet and finally came to rest. Williard left the captain barfing in his webbed seat. "Cheer up, Captain," He admonished as he picked up his AWOL bag. "We just had a candy ass pilot on this flight. Most of the guys herding these birds would have just crashed us in and picked up a new plane for the rest of the trip." The captain vomited into the aisle, wondering what kind of war he had gotten himself into.

Williard checked in with the flight desk and arranged for his return trip, then hurried off to find some transportation. A half bottle of penicillin got him a driver who took him around to all the medical headquarters where Colonel Pinkerton's letters were to be delivered. At each stop, he drummed up a conversation with the first sergeants. Some he knew well, some only in passing and a few not at all. In each case, though, he made arrangements through friendship or other inducements to be informed of the content of the return letters. He trusted Colonel Pinkerton about as much as he trusted his brother to fly six months without losing a plane. All the first sergeants were amenable. Sooner or later, they too would need a favor.

Business taken care of, Williard had his driver head for the marine VFW squadron, where he let him out at the headquarters building, a rudely constructed frame structure with sandbags piled in depth around it. He smartly saluted the first marine officer he saw coming out and asked where he might find Lt. Jason Williard.

"Jason? Oh, you must mean Jumpin' Jase. That fucker has bailed out so many times he's started buying stock in parachute companies." The marine officer scrutinized him. "Say, you look just like Jase, Sarge. Any relation?"

"He's my brother on those days I claim him."



"Hey! You must be Sgt. Williard then. I've heard about you. Got any penicillin?"

"Sure." Williard shook out a handful of pills.

"Thanks, Sarge. Just follow this road down toward the beach. His hooch is the second on the left. He's not there right now, though. The CO is raking him over the coals about that no landing gear landing."

"Any way I can help?"

"Naw, don't worry Sarge. The CO ain't crazy. Jumpin' Jase is the best fucking pilot we got. He's not so much pissed about the landing gear as he is about him booming the brass on the flight line when he came in. You shoulda been there. He came in straight over with his afterburners going, and knocked off all their hats. He really rattled the rafters, and then came back like he was doing a strafing run. You shoulda seen those brass hit the deck. They must of thought a MIG had got loose." The marine officer guffawed like a lunatic clown.

"Sounds just like something that crazy bastard would do. Well, thanks, sir. I'll head down to the beach and wait for him."

"Sure, Sarge. Just go on in. If anybody asks, just tell them who you are. They'll crack a beer for you while you're waiting."

"Thanks again. You need some more pills, go see Sergeant Borris over at the mobile lab. Tell him I sent you."

"Haw! No wonder Jumpin' Jase's report came back negative. Goddamn, you medics sure know how to run a war, don't you?"

"We do our best," Williard said with a straight face. "See you." He saluted and headed down toward the Quonset huts clustered by the beach where the pilots lived.

When no one answered his knock, Williard opened the door to the Quonset hut and located his brother's room. He knew it was his by the four parachutes his friends had painted on the door. Inside, he snatched a beer from the cooler and admired the artwork. Covering one whole wall were cutouts from Playboy and Penthouse. The pictures of nude young women were carefully pasted onto posterboards in interesting juxtapositions, as if they were having sex together. Some of the arrangements were even anatomically possible, if highly unlikely.



"Hey, Jim! Goddamn, good to see you, brother!" Jason shouted as he kicked open the door. Both arms were encumbered with six packs of beer. He knew his brother.

"Hey, Jase! What took you so long? Don't your CO have no sense of humor?"

"How the hell did you know I was with the old man? Never mind, I know. You medics have your ways. Have a beer."

"Thanks, I did, but I'll have another, since you offered. Where's Jerry?"

"He'll be along in a bit. He's over at the club putting the make on a nurse. He's been screwing his ass off ever since his ship Docked."

"That's what he gets for joining the Navy. No nooky unless you're in port."

"Yeah, but catching up sure is fine duty. How much penicillin you got on you?"

"Enough to cure what ails you. Why? You got a dose?"

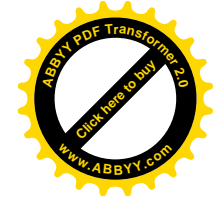
"No, but if you can spare a bottle, I know where I can trade it for some transportation. We gotta make the time count. The old man is putting me back in the air after tonight."

"He must have planes to spare." Crap. Only one night to party instead of three, which meant concentrating the fun. Chu Lai might have to close down if past reunions were any guide. Besides, that didn't leave much time for talk before they got going. It was already getting late in the day. Without realizing it, his grin disappeared and frown lines appeared on his face.

"Hey, why the sour puss, brother? You got a problem?" Jason said. His own grin faded.

Williard considered how to start then finally decided to just spit it out. "Jase, do you ever wonder what's really going on over here?"

"You mean like not letting us fight to win? Hell yes. We got a bunch of fucking wimps in charge. I ain't been allowed to bomb much else besides trees lately. All the good targets are off limits," Jason



said. Disgust was evident in his voice.

"Well, yeah, that's part of it, but there's more to it than that. Does it ever seem to you like the rear area troops don't give a shit about anything except wheeling and dealing for their own benefit?"

Jason quit gulping his beer and began drinking slower. "Yeah. You've noticed, too, huh?"

"I've not only noticed, but the longer I'm over here, the more I seem to be getting involved in the same shit," Williard confessed. "One deal seems to lead to another, and here lately I seem to be using most of them to keep my ass out of a sling."

Jason frowned. "You're not involved in any of that heavy shit are you?"

Williard knew what he was talking about. It was becoming common knowledge that a sort of khaki Mafia had gained control of much of the supply pipeline into the country, with tentacles reaching back to the states, where civilian contractors were paying huge kickbacks to have their supplies purchased. The overwhelming abundance of Ballentine beer was just one example. The pipeline ran from contractors right on down the services chain of command, from generals to many of the top sergeants in Vietnam.

"No, no. I wouldn't touch that kind of thing. I deal medicine, though, and a few other things."

"Aw, hell, that's nothing. You're not shorting the troops are you? That's the important thing."

"No, I wouldn't do that, but I could get in trouble just the same."

"Hell, this is a war zone. You've got to expect a few risks. Besides, everyone deals a little, if just in trading favors. I'll tell you what's wrong, though. The main problem is with them wimpy politicians back in Washington. They won't let us win the war like we could, and the longer it goes on, the more disgusted we all get."

"I still feel sort of guilty about it. Then there are the drugs. Too many of the troops are getting addicted, including my own."

"We've got the same problem in the marines. You're not dealing, are you?"



"I don't touch the stuff. Booze is about my limit. I let it go, though, so long as the dispensary runs OK."

"So do I. You can't stop the tide, Jim. It's everywhere over here. Same problem. The troops don't see no end in sight and the longer the war lasts, the more temptation there is. Hell, so long as a man can still do his job, let him worry about it. Concentrate on your part of the war. What else?"

Williard found that he had trouble explaining the troubling thoughts he had begun having lately. "Jase, it's not one thing in particular, it's the whole situation. Here we're supposed to be fighting a war and up until the last few days it's seemed to me more like all the troops I know are more interested in playing, or--ah, hell, it's hard to get clear in my mind."

Jason took a drink of his beer then set the can down on the table between them. He leaned forward. "Jim, I think I know what's bothering you. You don't think you're making a difference, do you?"

The increasing uneasiness Williard had begun to feel over the last few weeks began to come into focus. "Maybe that's it," he said. "I spend most of my professional time inspecting dirty dicks. The only time I've really felt like I was doing something useful was on the medcaps I told you about, but I guess those are over with for a while. Somehow, charlie got word of where I was going next and blew up the place. They damn near blew me up, too."

Jason got up and went to the cooler. He pulled out two more beers and passed one to Williard. "Brother, you've got the same problem a lot of the regular troops over here do. I think what you would really like is to have enough authority to put a stop to some of the really blatant crap and run the war like it should be. Am I right?"

"You probably are," Williard admitted.

"Well, I got a solution for you, like I mentioned to you before. This war ain't going to be over anytime soon the way things are going. Why don't you go ahead and apply for officer's candidate school? Get you a commission. Come back over here and start over and kick some rear area ass. Shit, the way it's going, you might make general before it's over, then you can run things to suit yourself. In the meantime, just make sure your deals are helping the grunts doing the fighting, or at least not hurting them."

Williard perked up. He tilted his beer can and took a healthy swallow, then said, "That much I can do. My little contact at the



mobile lab kept you flying, didn't it?" He grinned at his brother.

"Now you got it," Jason said.

"And that OCS deal, maybe I will apply." Suddenly his spirits sank again as he thought of Colonel Pinkerton. "Aw, hell. I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"That oil-stick crazy colonel. He would have to pass on my application, so that won't work. He's out to get me."

"You've been jerking his chain a little, I bet."

"A little," Williard admitted.

"Well, fuck him if he ain't got no sense of humor. Just wait til he rotates. In the meantime, if you really want to do something useful with all your contacts, I've got a proposition for you."

"Another deal?"

"Yeah, a big one. What it is--"

"Hey, brothers!" Ensign Jerry Williard burst into the room, eyes shining.

"Later," Jason said to Williard. "Fun time, now."

"Where's the beer?" Jerry asked. He was as keyed up as a freshly tuned piano.

"Right where you left it when you ran off with that red cross girl last night. How did it go with the nurse?"

"She's going to meet me tomorrow. Let's go get some chow and line our stomachs real good before we get started."

"Wait a minute," Jason said. "First we got to do something about our lowly enlisted brother here. Them stripes won't go over too good in an officer's club."

"Why don't we all put on stripes?" Jerry said.

"Why don't we all put on bars?" Jason said.



"I got a better idea," Williard said. "Let's not wear any insignia. You got enough fatigue shirts to spare, Jase?"

"Sure, I got plenty, but what's the idea?"

"Just thought we might pull the old switcheroo caper. That's always fun. Besides, it might save me from having to use up all my penicillin and codeine before we're finished celebrating."

"You got penicillin?" Jerry asked. "Better give me some. I don't trust red cross girls."

Williard handed Jerry enough pills to cure whatever he might have caught. Jason began climbing out of his flight suit. Williard and Jerry peeled down to the waist, then they all three put on one of Jason's fatigue shirts which he had never bothered having insignia sewed on. In fact, Jason had not worn fatigues since survival school training soon after getting his commission. Jason had only gotten into flight school by the barest of margins. He had enlisted in the Marine Corps right after getting his high school diploma. As quickly as he made corporal, he applied for flight school, but was told that first he had to pass the college level GED, general education development, test. Jason flunked the test twice, then backed up and punted. He called Williard and had him send a bottle of dextroamphetamine to his first sergeant, who loved the pills for the extra energy they gave him. Soon afterward, a group of test answers in a sealed envelope arrived in his mail. There was no return address. Jason passed the GED test the next time and topped his class in flight school, thereby proving that keen eyesight and extraordinary reflexes were more important than declension of verbs, that being where he had stumbled on the GED test. He was proving it all over again in Viet Nam, where no target was so tough that he wouldn't go after it.

Once bereft of insignia on their shirts, the brothers were remarkably hard to tell apart at first glance. They were all dark complexioned, wore the same type mustaches and differed in height and breadth by only a fraction of an inch here and a pound or two there, which was what Sgt. Williard was counting on with the switcheroo.

As they walked toward the mess hall, each officer they passed got three smart salutes, even the ones who recognized Lieutenant Williard. Those who did recognize him just grinned and wondered how he had somehow managed to become triplets. If the old man had trouble keeping the reins on one Williard, he was going to go apeshit with three of them.



"Where are we going next?" Jerry asked as they were finishing their meal, ignoring all the curious cross-eyed glances thrown their way.

"We better get away from this area," Jason said. "Too many people recognize me around here. I don't want to get grounded again."

"How about if we go over to the medical battalion club?" Jason suggested. "They ain't so gung ho as this here marine base."

"Good idea," Jerry said. "Are there lots of nurses there?"

"Enough, I'm sure," Williard said. "Are your insides in shape now?"

"If I don't get another drink soon, they're going to get out of shape," Jerry said.

"Let's go," Jason said.

Outside, a young marine buck sergeant who serviced Jason's F-4's was waiting with a jeep. He gaped at the three brothers as if a trio of Martians had suddenly materialized in front of him. "Jeez, I always wondered how you managed to fly so often, Lieutenant. Now I know. You're triplets. Which one of you is real?"

"Tonight, it doesn't matter," Williard said, passing over a bottle of penicillin.

Since Jason knew his way around, he took control of the jeep and they drove away. He piloted the jeep as if he were coming in for a night landing on an aircraft carrier, which was the same way he flew whether he was landing on a carrier or not. Whenever excess alcohol or some other impediment slowed his reflexes down to that of a normal human being, he simply visualized a yellow ball in the distance, similar to that used for gauging carrier approaches and aimed in that direction, regardless of what he was driving. It seemed to work. If the Viet Cong or NVA ever learned to recognize the markings on his jet they would scatter in all directions when they saw him zooming in on them. That wasn't likely, though, since he never managed to keep the same plane that long.

The medical battalion officer's club was an improvement over the usual tented environment of Williard's NCO club. It was a large frame building enclosing an open, dimly lighted area that contained a



bar, a dance floor and numerous tables and chairs. A small kitchen and grill was tucked in one corner. The sky had darkened and off-duty officers had already gotten started on the night's festivities. Back in the world, there might have been someone at the entrance to check ID cards, but in Vietnam, hardly anyone worried about such things. The three brothers passed inside and bellied up to the bar. They quickly got their attitude adjusted with a few double rum and cokes, letting Jerry do the ordering since he didn't have a chance to drink as often as the other two, or at least drink officially on his ship.

The enlisted bartender did a double take as he served them then decided he had better quit stealing vodka from the bar. Seeing double he was used to, but triple vision meant he must be hitting the stuff too hard. He couldn't even make out any rank insignia.

Their little Vietnamese waitress had the same problem when she began serving them at a table. Her eyes widened and she squinted at each of them like a sniper who couldn't decide on a target. "How come you three, not one?" She asked after bringing them their third round.

Williard plucked the drinks from her tray. "We got good scientists back home," He explained. "There's this machine, see? One goes in, three comes out."

Their waitress disappeared into the kitchen and reported to the dishwasher, her Viet Cong contact. She was scared. If it was true that the Americans had perfected a method for triplicating their officers, then the war was certainly as good as lost. As soon as she could, she hurried back. If the American scientists had discovered how to clone their soldiers, she decided she was going to resign from war work. Besides, if they were duplicating soldiers, maybe there was a shortage of women back where they came from and one of the sets of triplets could be seduced into marrying her. She visualized America as a country where every other building was a PX, supplying goods in endless quantities.

She was too late, though. A trio of nurses who had just arrived spotted them first. The brothers noticed the nurses at the same time and took advantage of their curiosity at the sight of such a nearly identical trio. Jason waved to them. The nurses crossed the room and joined them at their table.

"I'm Jason," Williard said, beginning the introductions, and also the swicheroo.

"I'm Jim," Jerry said.



"I'm Jerry," Jason said.

"Where's your insignia, Jason?" Anne, the first nurse said to Williard. She was a well-built brunette.

"I'm Jerry," Williard said. "I left my bars at home."

"What rank are you, Jim?" Betty, the second nurse asked Jerry. She was an equally well-built blond with a pretty, cameo-like face.

"I'm Jason," Jerry said. "I left my bars at home, too."

"Oh, I get it. You guys must be intelligence officers in disguise," Betty said.

Kim, the third nurse didn't get it. "I thought you were Jim," she said to Jerry. Kim was a petite redhead with freckles across her nose.

"He's Jim," Jerry said, pointing to Jason. "He's not intelligent, either."

"I thought he was Jerry," Kim said. Her eyes were beginning to cross.

"I'm Jerry," Williard said. He hung a bewildered expression on his face. "Or maybe I'm Jim."

"No, I'm Jim," Jason said.

"I thought I was Jim," Jerry said.

"Forget it," Anne said, thoroughly confused. "Where's our waitress?"

"Here," the Vietnamese girl said, who had returned and been listening to the conversation. If the duplicated Americans couldn't even tell themselves apart, maybe they wouldn't be that effective in the war effort after all. She dispensed more rum and hurried away to see the dishwasher. Unfortunately, after taking a look at the three identical officers, he had sneaked outside to report to his Viet Cong contact two buildings over at the NCO club. She quickly wrote a note pointing out the flaws in this new American secret weapon and taped it to the dishwasher's sink.

"I need some more clean glasses," the bartender called.



"Where in hell is my dishwasher?"

"Here, sir," the elderly Vietnamese man who cleaned and rinsed glasses said. His old lungs were wheezing from running to and from the NCO club to report the remarkable American scientific achievement to his superior. While he hurriedly got some clean glasses ready, he read the note from the waitress. He dropped the glasses back into the sink and ran for the NCO club again. In the meantime, the waitress was busy telling the other girls that the Americans were multiplying like flies.

"More rum!" Jerry shouted, causing heads to turn, then look curiously at their drinks to see what the potion contained which was making them see triple. Six Vietnamese waitresses hurried to the brothers' table, rum and cokes in hand. They hadn't believed the first waitress and wanted to check out the duplicating process for themselves.

"Goddamn, this is the best service I ever seen in a club," Jason said.

"Hey, can we get a little service over here?" A voice called from across the room. "Where the hell are all the waitresses?"

"What's your secret, Jerry?" Anne asked Jerry, sampling the plethora of rum suddenly available.

"I'm Jim," Jerry said, downing two drinks one after the other.

"There must be something wrong here," Anne said. "Why can't I get your names straight?"

"You must have a bad memory," Williard said. "I told you already I'm Jason." He poured down two drinks.

"I went to bed with a guy named Jason once," Betty said.

"I'm Jason," Jerry said. "Don't listen to them other guys."

"I'm the real Jason," Jason said, sensing a conquest.

"I don't believe you," Betty said. She pointed at Jerry. "This is Jason. He just told me so."

"I'll get you for this, Jim," Jason said.

"Who cares?" Kim said. "They all look alike anyway."



"I care," Betty said. "I like Jason."

"I'm Jason," Williard said.

"I'm Jason," Jerry said.

"I'll get both you bastards," Jason said. He chugged a rum and coke and reached for another.

"Money first," One of the ubiquitous waitresses said.

"Jim is paying," Jason said.

"Jason is paying," Jerry said.

"Jerry is paying," Williard said.

"Here, I'll pay, you crazy bastards," Kim said. "You guys will never get it straightened out." She pulled out a roll of script and handed it to one of the waitresses.

"What's all this commotion?" The club officer appeared on the scene and tried to break through the ring of women. Yells from other tables stopped him.

"We want some fucking service," a rising chorus of alcohol-less officers shouted. They got up from their chairs and gravitated toward all the action, plucking rum and cokes from the glassy-eyed waitresses, breaking their trance.

"More rum," Jerry shouted again. The women hurried to obey and spent all of Kim's money.

"Who are you guys?" The club officer said over the tumult as he broke through the spaces vacated by the waitresses.

"I'm Williard," Sgt. Williard said.

"I'm Williard," Lt. Williard said.

"I'm Williard," Ensign Williard said. "Have a drink, Sarge." He held out a glass.

"I'm a major," the club officer corrected indignantly. "Besides, you can't all be Williards." Then he did a double take and decided that maybe they could be after all. While His glance was flicking from



brother to brother trying to figure out what was going on, he was bumped from behind by the returning waitresses. Each held a tray of rum and cokes.

"We need pay for drinks," they said, trying to fend off grasping hands.

"I'll pay for Jason," Betty said, producing a roll.

"I'm Jason," Jim said.

"I'm Jason," Jerry said.

"Don't believe them bastards," Jason said. "I'm Jason. I'm Jumpin' Jason, as a matter of fact."

"You can't be," Anne said. "I've heard of him and there's no one else like him in the whole Marine Corps."

"You got that right," Williard said, plucking another drink from a tray. "I'm unique."

"No, you're Jim," Jerry said. "Who wants to screw?" He chugged down more rum.

"We do!" The male portion of their audience yelled.

"We do!" Some of the female portion echoed, getting into the act. This was better than a floorshow.

"I do, if you're Jason," Betty said, grabbing Jerry's arm protectively.

"I do," Anne said. "I don't care if you're Jason or not. This is fun!"

"I do," Kim said. "How much do you charge?" She had taken in too much rum and gotten the male and female roles reversed.

"We all do, so let's go," Jason said.

"Not so fast," the club officer said. "I think you guys are impostors. You aren't even wearing your rank. Let's see some ID."

"Boo!" The other officers shouted. So long as someone else was buying the drinks, they didn't give a shit. Everyone in the club was now congregated around the Williard table, snatching drinks from



the waitresses right and left.

"Certainly," Sgt. Williard said, producing his card.

"You're a sergeant!" The club officer screamed. "You don't belong here!"

"Here's mine," Jerry said, pulling out his card.

The major read the Ensign rank on it. "OK, now let's see yours," the club officer said to Jason who had exchanged cards with Williard while the major was busy with Jerry.

"You're a sergeant, too!" The club officer said. "What's going on here?"

"There must be some mistake," Williard said, producing Jason's Id for the club officer to look at again.

"I could of swore you were a sergeant a minute ago," the club officer said, bewilderment building up like a cat which had lost its litter box.

"He's the sergeant," Williard said, pointing to Jerry who now held his ID card.

"I thought you were an ensign," the club officer said, thoroughly confused now.

"No, that's the ensign over there," Jerry said, pointing to Jason, who had palmed his card while the club officer was examining Jason's.

"See?" Jason said, holding up Jerry's Id.

"I'm going fucking crazy," the club officer said.

"Must be FUO," Williard said. Do you need a duty excuse?"

"UFO's!" Several officers exclaimed. "Where?"

"Right there," Williard said, pointing at the major.

"You're all fucking crazy!" The major screamed. "I'm calling the MP's!"

"Are you really Jason?" Betty asked Williard, ignoring the



threat.

"No, I'm Jim," Williard said, getting it right for a change.

"I'm calling the MP's," the club officer said again, louder.

"Boo!" The other officers yelled. "More rum!"

"Do you want to fuck?" Betty asked, forgetting that Williard had just said that he wasn't Jason.

"Yes!" Several score male officers shouted. They crowded closer, depleting the waitresses' trays again on the way.

"You're all crazy!" The club officer shouted, grabbing one of the last drinks in reach while he headed for the phone.

"We better get out of here," Jason said.

"More rum!" Jerry called, true sailor that he was.

"I want to go," Betty said.

"Me, too, Anne said."

"I have to, I'm broke," Kim said.

It took several minutes for the six of them to untangle themselves from the admiring crowd, and several more minutes to get six bodies crowded into a jeep designed for only four passengers. Jason took the wheel and aimed for his yellow ball, throwing Betty's face into Jerry's lap. "Are you Jason?" She asked, trying to unbutton his trousers.

"I'm Jason," Williard said, feeling for Anne's breast while he downed the last of the rum he had carried out of the club.

"No, I'm Jason," Jason said, turning around in the seat. Behind him, he spotted blinking lights. "Uh, oh, here come the MP's," he said, trying to drive with one hand and get the other inside Kim's fatigue blouse at the same time.

"Are you Jason?" Kim asked, helping his hand inside.

"If them fucking MP's catch us, I'm not," Jason said. He aimed for the yellow ball, pretending he was landing on a carrier. The jeep careened around a corner and slowed to a halt in front of his hooch,



upsetting Betty's aim just as she found an interesting appendage to play with.

"We're fucked," Jerry said.

"Not yet," Kim said, struggling to rearrange herself.

"Leave it to me," Williard said.

"I don't want you to leave," Anne said, unbuttoning the rest of her blouse.

"Halt!" The MP Sergeant ordered, tumbling out of his jeep. "You guys are under arrest!"

"How about us?" Anne asked, displaying her breasts.

"Let me take care of these guys first," The MP sergeant said, admiring the view.

"Look here," Sgt. Williard said, pulling his ID card out of its pocket and flipping it to show the reverse side, where a prominent red cross was overlaid on the rest of the the card.

"Aw, shit," the MP said. "Why didn't you show that to the club officer?"

"There wasn't time for him to look at both sides," Sgt. Williard said. "Well, I guess you lost track of us while you were in hot pursuit, didn't you?"

"Sure, that's what happened," Anne said, letting her fatigue blouse swing free.

"Do you want to fuck?" Betty asked.

"He's not Jason," Jerry said.

"I'm Jason," Williard said.

"You fucking medics are all crazy," the MP sergeant said. "Go on, get inside and out of my sight." There was no profit in trying to arrest a medic unless one committed rape or murder. Should he try, he would suddenly find all his blood alcohol and drug tests on other miscreants coming back negative. It wasn't worth the trouble.

"Thanks, Sarge. Here, have some penicillin. Take it before and



after and in between."

"You're all crazy," the MP said, but he pocketed the penicillin tablets before he drove away.

Jason grabbed Kim and led her into the Quonset hut. Jerry grabbed Anne and began undressing her. Williard grabbed Betty and pushed her along behind Jerry.

"You guys are crazy," Anne said, admiring Jason's art work as they staggered into Jason's room.

"Where's the booze?" Jerry said, struggling to finish undressing Anne.

"I'm Jason," Williard said, popping a beer.

"I know," Betty said. "Are you ready now? You guys are more fun than doctors."

"Don't say that," Williard said. "I'm almost a doctor."

"Yeah, but you're Jason," Betty said, shucking the last of her clothes and pushing him down onto one of the bunks.

"I'll get you for this," Jason said from the other bunk, his voice muffled by Kim's thighs. She was trying for one of the positions depicted on his wall.

"More rum," Jerry said from the floor where Anne was in the process of covering his body.

"Have a beer," Williard said from around Betty's breasts, which were preventing him from drinking. He passed the can down to Jerry.

"I'm going to strafe you next time I'm down south," Jason said, coming up for air.

"I'm finished," Betty said a few minutes later. She jumped off Williard's prone body and stood swaying nakedly. "Who's next?"

No one answered. The rum had taken its toll and the Williard brothers were done for the night.



Chapter Fifteen

"Gawd, my head," Jerry groaned, clutching his hair.

"Gawd, my stomach," Jason gurgled, barfing into the sink.

"What's wrong with you candy asses?" Williard asked smugly. Just before passing out, he had remembered to pop a couple of APC with codeine. Sometime during the night all three of the nurses had departed, having to go on duty at 0700. If they felt as bad as his brothers looked this morning, he felt sorry for their patients.

"You bastard, you must of cheated," Jerry said. "Where's the girls?"

"They're gone," Jason said, wiping his mouth. "One of them woke me up when she crawled out from under."

"Well, where's the rum, then?" Jerry moaned. "Gawd, I need to get drunk again. I can't stand hurting like this."

"Here, try a few of these," Williard said, producing his bottle of hangover pills.

Jerry shook some out into his hand and downed them with a half glass of water. He poured the other half over his head. Jason simply tilted the bottle and gulped a mouthful of the pills from it, then bent over the sink, alternately drinking from the faucet and letting water run over his head.

Gradually, the two officers became more or less coherent, hangovers replaced by the glow of codeine and hair of the dog from a few leftover beers.

"How come sergeants get to carry them pills around and officers don't?" Jerry asked.

"Yeah, how come?" Jason echoed. "Hell, if I had a pocketful of them things next time I went north I bet I could put a bomb right up Ho Chi Minh's ass."

"I didn't think the marines bombed that far north," Williard said.



"We don't, normally, but I could always get lost," Jason said.

"OK, plant one in his ass for me," Williard said. He shook out some more pills and Jason dropped them into a pocket of his flight suit.

"I could use a few of them things next time we're in Hong Kong," Jerry said. "That way I wouldn't have to sober up the whole time."

Williard handed over the rest of his pills. "That's it. You bastards done broke me. Now I can't get drunk again until I get back to Long Binh."

"I'll do it for you," Jerry said. "I still got to meet that nurse I was with yesterday.

"You need any more penicillin?"

"Wouldn't hurt," Jerry admitted. "The way I hear it, the only guy she ain't screwed in Chu Lai yet is one of her patients that got his pecker shot off."

"I better have some, too," Jason said. "Say, did I ever fuck Betty last night?"

"If you ever convinced her you was Jason, you probably did. I never seen a broad so hung up on a name." He divided his remaining penicillin between his two brothers.

A honk came from outside.

"That must be my driver," Jason said. "I got to go get briefed. I heard we're going north today."

"Watch out for MIG's," Williard said.

"Them gomers better watch out for me. I feel real mean today."

"Shit, there goes another plane," Jerry said. "Say, it's been fun brothers, but Suzy Q got off work an hour ago. I better go catch her before she gets her panties back on."

Jason's driver let him out at squadron headquarters, Jerry out at the nurse's quarters, then Jason's driver took Williard around to pick up the answers to Colonel Pinkerton's letters. He perused each of the replies carefully. Only one of them had something bad to say.



That one was from an early rising officer who had been at the club the night before and had developed a conscience along with his hangover. Seeing the name Williard listed as the courier and remembering the three Williards who had caused such a ruckus, he added a note that perhaps the sergeant had been impersonating an officer. Fortunately, that first sergeant was a long time friend of Williard.

"Top, does that endorsement really have to go back with me?" Williard asked.

The first sergeant thumbed through the Documents. "Jim, I don't have much choice. The write-up about you is on the same page as the answer to your colonel and the CO already has copies in his file. Also, I have to record that it went out."

Williard thought. "What if your log shows I came by to pick it up but it had already been misrouted?"

"Good idea," the first sergeant said. He tucked the documents into a manila envelope and tossed it into a tray. Williard looked at the label on the tray. PANAMA, it read. He wondered what Panama had to do with Vietnam, other than the fact that both countries contained jungles. Trust the bean counters to make a connection, though.

"Thanks, top. That should do it," He said. By the time the correspondence found its way back to Colonel Pinkerton, Williard figured the colonel would be retired and no longer interested in him.

Unfortunately, the irate club officer had a good memory for the names he had seen on the ID cards. He addressed other letters that didn't get lost. He sent one to the Marine Corps wing commander, one to the naval commander at Camh Ranh Bay and a third and fourth to Colonel Pinkerton and General Ware back at Long Binh. All four went out over the telex lines and were in the proper hands while Williard was still in the air on his way back.

The cross winds had died down and the return trip got off to a good start and continued that way. While the old C-54 droned its way south, Williard closed his eyes and went back over his conversation with Jason. His brother had provided only partial answers to his dissatisfaction. The suggestion that he felt had the most merit was the idea of applying for OCS. He fantasized a while about how he would handle a unit as an officer, how he could really contribute to the war effort, then remembered again that Colonel Pinkerton would laugh him out of his office if he tried for an appointment. There was another solution, though. I could always put in for a combat unit, he



thought, and put my training to some real use. Saving the lives of wounded grunts would sure beat dosing dirty dicks. By the time his plane landed, he had about made up his mind. His only concern was for Heavy and Junkman and the other medics should he leave them. It would be almost akin to leaving kids alone in a house with sticks of dynamite to play with.

While Williard's plane was heading south, other things were happening up north.

The colonel commanding the marine air wing at Chu Lai read the complaining telex from the club officer three times, trying to make sense of it. Apparently A Sgt. Williard had been observed impersonating an Ensign Williard or a Lt. Williard or a Sergeant Williard, while an Ensign Williard had been impersonating a Sgt. Williard or a Lt. Williard or an Ensign Williard and at the same time, a Lt. Williard had been impersonating a Sgt. Williard or an Ensign Williard or a Lt. Williard.

"Jumpin' Jase must have been in rare form last night," the CO said to his aide, who had read the same report before bringing it to the colonel. "He probably thought he was a sergeant again, or maybe had joined the navy instead of the marines. What do you think?"

"I think the army better get them a new club officer over at the medical battalion," the aide said. "I know there ain't but one Jumpin' Jase in the whole world and this dude claims there was three of them disrupting his club last night. He must have been pretty drunk himself to be seeing triple."

"That's what I think. Screw them medics if they ain't got no sense of humor." The colonel crumpled the report and tossed it into a trashcan.

The captain of Jerry's destroyer was reading a similar report a day later just as they were heading back out to sea. He read it three times, too. It made even less sense to him than it might have because the Captain had celebrated a little too much himself the night before. "Get Ensign Williard up here," he told his aide, then put his head back in his hands so long that he very nearly ran his ship into some harbor rocks.

The aide escorted Ensign Williard into the captain's cabin.



"Gee, Skipper, you look kind of seasick," He said.

The captain turned even greener as the destroyer leaned over into a turn. "I never get sheashick," he said from between clenched teeth. "How come you look so goddamned chipper this morning?"

"One of them impostors over at the medical battalion club gave me some hangover pills," Jerry said, spying the report on the captain's desk.

"Do they work?" The captain asked hopefully.

"They sure do. Just look at me." Ensign Williard stood bright eyed and clear headed, almost seeming to float above the deck with codeine euphoria.

The captain glared at him from bloodshot eyeballs. "Hand 'em over," he ordered, picking up the complaining telex with one hand and holding out the other, palm up. Williard's brother got the idea immediately. He handed over his remaining pills to the captain and pocketed the telex. The captain gulped down the pills. Within a few minutes, he recovered enough from his illness to believe that now he could successfully steer his ship back out to sea.

"You're excused, Ensign," the captain said. "Impostors, my ass. I think them medics need a new club officer. How could an ensign impersonate an ensign, much less a sergeant and a lieutenant?"

"It's a mystery to me, Captain. Thank you sir," Ensign Williard said as he left. So much for no hangovers in Hong Kong the next time, but what the hell, he thought, I've lived through it before. He crumpled the club officer's report and tossed it overboard.

Colonel Pinkerton read the report with glee. Aha, he thought. Impersonating officers now, is he? Blasphemy! He called his clerk in and had him begin drawing up courts-martial papers, satisfied that he had adequate grounds even though there seemed to be some confusion about who had been impersonating whom. He wasn't confused, though. Since it couldn't possibly have been the officers, it must have been the sergeant.

General Ware read the report and grinned mysteriously. He placed it in the special file he was compiling on Sgt. Williard. Pretty soon now, it would be time for him to act.



There was one other consequence of the Williard brother's reunion. A couple of weeks later, the same spooks in Saigon who had been driving themselves crazy trying to figure out the sudden cleanliness of dead Viet Cong bodies noticed a sudden increase in NVA reinforcements in the Chu Lai area. A captured document indicated it was in response to the new American technological development that was triplicating officers in a scientific machine and were already shipping the first ones overseas. Another five spooks were added to the team and began going mad trying to make sense of this new intelligence. They were not successful, but they did recommend reinforcements to the Chu Lai area. After that, several of them reported for psychiatric treatment.

Sgt. Williard dropped Colonel Pinkerton's letters by his office, but managed to avoid the colonel, who was busy reviewing the court-martial recommendation he was getting ready to forward to General Ware. After delivering the colonel's letters, Williard walked over to the motor pool to arrange transportation back to the dispensary.

"Geez, Sarge, I just finished washing my jeep," the driver complained. "Now I'll have to do it all over again before the colonel inspects again in the morning."

"War is hell, son," Williard said. "Let's hit the road."

The first thing Williard did after arriving back at the tanker compound was to replenish his supply of penicillin and codeine. Luckily, Dum-Dum had just finished making up another batch of APC with codeine, which had been sorely depleted by the jungle juice party, and by Heavy, now back on duty, who had been treating patients in Williard's absence.

Sick call that morning was compounded by having to review charts of treatments ordered while he was gone, but Heavy and Junkman had done well. Captains Harkness and Duarez had not been called in to consult very often. The only problem he found was that Heavy had used penicillin instead of tetracycline to treat a sudden spate of diarrhea. Naturally, it hadn't helped since diarrhea in the country was almost all caused by gram negative rather than gram-positive bacteria. The gram staining characteristics of bacteria separated them into two broad classes, each of which were treated differently. Heavy had started treatment without waiting on his culture and sensitivity reports and gone in the wrong direction. Williard knew that was part of the learning process, though, and mistakes were the best teachers. He doubted that Heavy would make that error again, but it still entailed calling the troopers back in for



the proper treatment.

Williard got on the phone to Sergeant Major Crock to get that ball rolling. Crock was very subdued. "Doc," he said, "that shot you gave me cleared up that dose I caught. I hear you got some stuff you can take to prevent it in the first place, though. Is there any way I can get any in case I get taken by surprise again?"

"Certainly, Sergeant Major Crockashit."

"What? What was that you said?"

"I said come by and see me and I'll fix you up, Sergeant Major. Supplies are limited, though. I can't give you but enough for one prophylactic dose at a time."

"Oh. That's what I thought you said," Sergeant Major Crock said. Williard understood the remark perfectly. It meant that now the sergeant major would take pains to stay on his good side so that he wouldn't have to worry about carrying an infection home to his wife. In just one short week he had converted the sergeant major from an antagonist who rigidly minded regulations to one whom he now suspected would see all kinds of possibilities inherent in a war zone where he was one of the most senior of enlisted men. He just hoped the sergeant major would deal in something besides Ballentine beer, or if not, at least send some of it to the Air Force units instead of army ones.

Williard hung up the phone and turned back to his charts. He was just making a final entry in the last one when the phone rang.

"Dispensary. Sgt. Williard."

"Sgt. Williard, this is Gunnery Sergeant Bullock, VMF Marine wing at Chu Lai. Don't you have a brother up here?"

"I did yesterday."

"Well, you still do, but he's over at the Evac hospital being treated for a sprained ankle."

"What happened?" Williard asked, already anticipating the answer.

"Nothing much. His navigation gear got fouled up and he had to pickle his bombs over downtown Hanoi after he took a hit."



"Goddamn. The crazy bastard really had gone after Uncle Ho. "Don't tell me. He lost another plane."

"Yeah, but he managed to get outside the city limits before he bailed out. A Jolly green came in and got him and his Gib." The Jolly Green giants were rescue helicopters and GIB was the acronym for guy in back, the navigator of the F-4's.

"I didn't think the Jolly Greens went in that close to Hanoi," Williard said. He wondered how Jason had managed that trick.

"They don't, normally, but a few days ago he got into a poker game with the pilot and owed him some money. It's a good thing he did, otherwise that pilot would never have chanced it."

Shithouse luck again. Williard remembered one time as a teenager Jason had hopped on a big Harley Davidson motorcycle for the first time in his life. He had gunned it up a hill. That was before he had ever heard about the yellow aiming ball used on night carrier landings. The motorcycle had topped the hill, then when Jason attempted to slow down and turn around, he had gotten the handlebar throttle and pedal brake mixed up with the controls used for bicycles. The big motorcycle had topped the hill and went sailing sideways over a cliff like a jet airplane. In fact, Williard thought that flight might have been what stimulated Jason's desire to fly. Luckily, he had been thrown clear and bounced down through resilient branches of some trees at the bottom of the cliff and emerged with little more than scratches and bruises, just as he was still doing now when his planes went down.

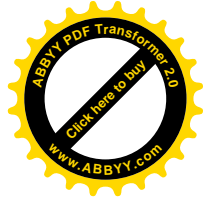
"So what happened after that?"

"He's off flight status for a week. The old man is really pissed this time. He's sending him down south until he can find another plane for him."

"No shit. How far south?"

"Right to Long Binh where you are. While he's not flying, the skipper wants him to try to find out where in hell all the jeeps are disappearing to down there. If we don't get some up here soon we'll be having to run errands in goat carts."

Williard knew where all the jeeps were disappearing to. Every bean-counting rear area officer believed implicitly that he deserved his own personal vehicle to run around in. They used devious bureaucratic paper shuffling to assure that they all got first call on



every jeep arriving at the Saigon Docks. The air force got them first, then USARV and MACV, then the medics and logistical commands. What few were left over finally dribbled down to the infantry divisions, leaving most of the grunts having to hike anywhere they needed to go. He also knew that Colonel Pinkerton was one of the worst offenders, thinking that it was good training for the grunts to have to walk, especially since he felt they were notoriously lackadaisical about maintaining their vehicles properly and didn't deserve to have them.

Williard wondered what methods Jason might use to check out the jeep shortage. He said, "Gunny, I hope Jason doesn't run into Colonel Pinkerton before I see him. He might just take it into his mind to do something foolish. The colonel don't believe in yellow balls."

"Yellow balls? Is that a new kind of venereal disease?"

"It's something Jase caught while he was learning to fly off carriers, but it ain't got nothing to do with venereal. Tell him to talk to me before he goes checking into jeeps."

"You got it Sarge. Say, I just heard they got a new club officer over at the medical battalion up here. They're sending the old one to Japan for psychiatric evaluation."

"It's a tough war. Thanks for the warning, Gunny. If Jumpin' Jase is heading this way, I better start laying some groundwork so he don't get arrested."

"We would appreciate it, Sarge. Life wouldn't be the same up here without Jumpin' Jase. The old man wouldn't have much to do if he wasn't always in his office looking for another plane for him to fly."

"There ain't no F-4's down here, Gunny, so you can relax."

"That won't stop him, Sarge. He'd fly a fucking chopper if he couldn't get his hands on anything else. In fact, he's been talking about taking lessons lately."

"Oh, shit," Williard said and hung up the phone.

Chapter Sixteen



Jumpin' Jase got into Long Binh that evening. Williard got a call from him the next morning just as he was beginning sick call.

"Hey brother! How's the clap clinic going?" Jason said.

"Hey Jase! Where are you?"

"Right now I'm in the Air force nurses' barracks. That's where I spent the night."

Williard didn't doubt it. His brother's shit eating grin and line of blarney got him into and out of situations most men couldn't even dream of. Once he had even talked himself into and out of the girl's dressing room at their high school gym with a three-day suspension from school the only outcome. The girl's gym teacher, however, had to look for another job when her compliancy was found out.

"I wondered where you were. Your Gunny called and told me you'd be in, but I swear I thought he told me you were supposed to be looking into the jeep shortage, not the shortage of nurses."

"Oh them jeeps. I already solved that problem. They're all parked around the officer's clubs here every night. Every brass hat in Long Binh must have one. Now all I need to do is figure some way to get them back up north where they belong. Any ideas?"

"Not right off hand, but I'll study the situation. Say, how's your ankle?"

"No problem. I'm even going flying today. I found me an army warrant officer who's going to give me some lessons flying helicopters. You ought to talk to some of those dudes. They ain't got a scared bone in their bodies. They take them choppers into places I'd even think twice about."

Williard knew Jason was right about that. Most army choppers were piloted by 19 and 20 year old warrant officers who had yet to learn they weren't immortal, whereas jet pilots were almost all in their late twenties and early thirties and knew very well how quickly they could die. With certain exceptions, of course, such as Jumpin' Jase.

"Be careful."

"How can you be careful flying a helicopter in a war zone?"



What you got going on this afternoon?"

"Nothing after sick call. Why don't you meet me at the medical battalion NCO club when you get back from your lessons? If you get back. I'm beginning to get an idea about those jeeps."

"My man! That's the deal I started to mention when you were up here. See you later."

Williard went back to his sick call, musing about the jeep problem while he tended to his patients. However he arranged it, there was bound to a hue and cry after it was over, especially from Pinkerton. It might be a good idea for him to just disappear along with the jeeps. Goddamnit, I'm going to do it, he thought. A combat unit where I can do some good. And if that oil-rag toting colonel tries to stop me, I'll go see General Ware. I hear he's a straight guy. He felt his heartbeat speed up at the thought of combat, remembering the shattering blast of the bomb in the village and the deafening staccato of rifle and machine gun fire on the boat. Fuckit, he told himself. If Jason can do it, I can. Heavy and Junkman will just have to learn to take care of themselves.

As sick call was nearing its end, Captain Duarez popped into the dispensary. "Hey, Sarge, I need to talk to you," He said.

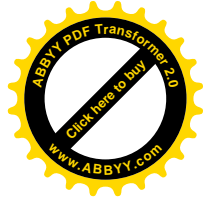
Williard looked up from his last chart, a young private who had an inch long gash in his eyelid, a souvenir of standing up when another trooper told him to shut up. Heavy was practicing his suturing on the private. He glanced that way and almost swallowed his cigar. Heavy had hold of the injured eyelid with a pair of thumb forceps, and was trying to get a suture needle which he had clamped in a needle holder through the top edge of the gash. Even in the grip of the thumb forceps, the trooper's eyelid was blinking and moving. Heavy was trying to coordinate his needle thrusts with the movement, but his hands were shaking and out of synch with the blinks.

Williard held up a hand in front of Duarez. "Just a minute, Doc. Heavy! Goddamnit, sew away from the eye! That way if you miss, you won't puncture that young hero's eyeball."

The young trooper promptly fainted.

"It's OK, Sarge. He's not blinking now," Heavy said.

"Well, sew away from the eyeball anyway. You might hiccup and then where would we be?"



"Thanks Sarge. I never thought of that." Heavy resumed his suturing.

Williard turned back to Captain Duarez. "What you need, Doc?"

"Can I have the jeep today? I got some business to take care of," Duarez said.

"Sorry, Doc. I'm going to have it tied up the next couple of days, and most especially today."

"Aw shit. I heard they got some new watches in at the big PX. I wanted to get one."

Williard considered. "Tell you what, Doc. I'll let you ride in with me tomorrow and drop you off. You'll have to find your own way back, though. I'll be staying overnight."

"What about sick call? Won't you be here?"

"I'll drive back first thing in the morning."

"OK, I'll check with you tomorrow at noon. Don't forget me." Captain Duarez went away grumbling to himself. First Sgt. Williard had failed to make it to Vung Tau and now he was tying up the unit's only jeep almost every day. Besides, those Seiko watches would probably all be gone by tomorrow. He wondered what Williard was up to. Knowing him, it couldn't possibly be anything that had a hint of regulation to it. He made a note to try to find out where he would be staying after riding in with him the next day. Maybe he could find out something worth reporting to Colonel Pinkerton. If someone didn't take this sergeant down a notch soon he might very well start thinking about setting up a practice after his retirement and set the whole civilian medical hierarchy on its ear.

After a marathon poker game the previous night, none of the other medics were much interested in leaving the compound, having gotten drunk and lost most of their money. Williard drove to the Long Binh compound by himself. He stopped at the big PX there first and bought the last half dozen Seiko watches still for sale. They could always be resold at a profit or traded for major favors, which he thought he might be needing, sooner rather than later. He was still thinking about the jeeps. He felt a little guilty about buying more watches than he needed when he knew grunts in the field seldom got a chance to sample the cornucopia of the big Long Binh PX. He assuaged his guilt with the thought that if he hadn't bought them,



some other rear area soldier would have. He smiled wryly to himself as he remembered what an old sergeant had told him once: the logistical tail wags the fighting head of the dog and grunts are always at the end of the supply line. They get plenty of bullets but very little beans.

Williard was on his second beer when Jason put in an appearance. He was wearing his flight suit as usual, which had only been washed twice since he had arrived in country, both times when he went down over the ocean. Its dirt and bloodstains gave him the appearance of a lean, mean fighting aviator, which in his case was no canard. Williard waved him over to his table.

A couple of NCO's gave the lieutenant a curious glance, not alone because he looked so much like the sergeant he sat down with. They wondered who he was. Only those closest to him could see the bars on his shoulders, which had not been polished since his first combat sortie and were hard to distinguish from the background stains on his flight suit.

"Hey, brother!" Jason said.

"Hey, Jase. Grab a seat." Sgt. Williard signaled for some more beer.

The Vietnamese waitress who brought it stared curiously at the brothers' faces.

"You all the same two. How come?" She asked.

"American technology," Sgt. Williard said. "We got these scientists, see? They got this big machine. One soldier goes in, two come out. You savvy?"

"Two from one? Numbah ten!" The waitress hurried away to report the phenomena to her Viet Cong contact at this end of the Long Binh compound. A few days later the Saigon spook team would begin to wonder whether there really was some secret laboratory cloning American soldiers which they weren't yet aware of, and the Viet Cong around Long Binh would begin recruiting even more heavily in order to match the American's duplicating machine.

"You're gonna drive those girls batshit," Jason laughed.

"That's the idea," Williard grinned. "How did the chopper training go?"



"Give me one more day and I can fly them things better than an F-4." Jason said.

"If you fly them better than a jet, the army is going to get awful short of choppers."

"No problem. I can't lose more than one a day and I'm not going to be down here more than a week at the most. What about the jeeps? If I can come up with some, the old man might get off my ass for a while. His got blown up the last time we got rocketed."

"I've been thinking. We know there's plenty of them parked at the officer's clubs every evening and night. Don't you have some cargo planes coming through here now and then?"

"Yeah. In fact, we got one due in tomorrow night, but I heard all it's bringing is some more of that shitty Ballentine's. Why?"

"Could you get three or four men from your squadron down here by tomorrow?"

"If I promised the old man a jeep, I could. Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Yup. I can bring a couple of my men in from the dispensary tomorrow, too, if I can keep them sober that long."

"Will I need to call the old man and have some paperwork ready in case we get caught?"

"Naw, don't worry. Most of them jeeps have been stolen or sidetracked from where they belong anyway. I doubt anyone will report them missing, except maybe the colonel."

"You're talking about that oil-checking colonel of yours that's after your ass?"

"Yeah. If we pull this off at all, it will have to be at the medical battalion where I know my way around and have some contacts in case we run into problems. Even there it's liable to get a little hairy, especially with the colonel keeping tabs on me."

"Damn, and here I thought I was the one who was living dangerously. Well, fuckit. Get a hunch, bet a bunch, lose your ass, sleep in the grass." Jason clapped his brother on the shoulder. "I appreciate this, old buddy. I can just picture the old man's reaction when I bring him a new jeep."



"Glad to help. I sure hope it comes off, because this is going to be my last deal."

Jason fingered his mustache and peered curiously at his brother. "Why the last?"

Williard took a deep breath. He clutched his beer can with both hands. "It's my last because I've decided to put in for a combat unit."

"Shit, brother, that is some news. Mind telling me why?"

Williard made wet circles on the table with his beer. "Do you remember what we talked about in Chu Lai?"

"Yeah, but I said you should go to OCS, not out in the boonies. You'll get your ass shot off."

"Maybe, but that's what I'm going to do. I'm tired of this rear area crap."

Jason thought a moment before commenting. "Well, hell, I guess if I was in your position I'd do the same thing. I don't think I could stand it if I was a just a briefing officer or like in weather or intelligence and had to watch the other guys go out on missions every day."

"I'm glad you understand," Williard said seriously. "The only thing that really bothers me about it is leaving my men. I'll worry my ass off wondering about them."

"Listen, Jim, you can't think of it that way. Hell, I felt like that, too when I went off to flight school. I had a squad then, remember? I hated to leave them, but a man's gotta follow his own path. If you feel like this is right for you, then your men ought to be glad for you."

"What happens if they get a real regulation charlie in to replace me?"

"Then they'll just have to soldier until the situation changes."

Williard tried to picture Heavy as a sober, respectable soldier. Or the Junkman without his junk. Could they do it? Maybe, but he wouldn't want to bet a lot of money on the prospect. Jason had put his finger on the salient point, though. He couldn't look out for them forever, regardless of what happened. Sooner or later, everyone got assigned to a different outfit.



"I guess you're right," Williard said. He picked up his beer, drained it and stood up. "Come on. I'd better get you back to your nurse's hooch, if that's where you're still staying, and let you make that call to Chu Lai." He felt strangely calm, now that he had committed himself in Jason's presence.

"I'm at the transient officer's quarters now. The chief nurse kicked me out. Said I was a bad influence and all that crap."

Williard drove his brother back to the hooch he was now assigned to for the duration of his mission. He waited in the jeep until he came back out, sipping a beer to pass the time and wondering if he wasn't biting off more than he could chew this time. He worried a little, but not too much. There was so much chicanery going on that a little more shouldn't hurt, and this project was for a good cause.

"All taken care of," Jason said, interrupting Williard's ruminations. "I'll have three men coming in tomorrow morning, and the old man sent a twix back down the line to alert the cargo plane pilot. Shit, this is going to be more fun than bombing Hanoi."

"We may have to move to Hanoi if this doesn't come off," Williard said. He noticed that Jason had changed into fatigues for a change.

"You worry too much. Well, what we going to do the rest of the day?"

"We could run into Binh Hoa for a while. Have you ever ridden a pig?"

"No, but I rode a Harley Davidson one time. There couldn't be that much difference."

"Tell that to Heavy. Come on, we just got time to get there and have a little fun before I have to get back."

"You gotta be kidding," Jason said, eyeing the huge sow. It got to its feet as soon as it spied Williard and trotted over, dropping piglets along the way, arthritis apparently still cured. It was several piglets short. Evidently, some had gone to piggy heaven with an apple placed in their mouths after the last episode. The old sow remembered the last American it had seen and how much it had enjoyed the beer Heavy had fed it. Williard poured a couple of beers



into a pan for it.

"No, no!" Nellie complained. "Beer for pig numbah ten. It make him go crazy!"

"My brother wants to ride it," Williard said, replenishing the beer.

"Him clazy, too!"

"Here," Jason said. He pulled out a roll of piasters and handed them to Nellie. That disposed of her objections. He climbed aboard.

The sow slurped up the last of the beer. Its ears twitched, feeling the weight on its back. Jason visualized a yellow ball in front of him, kicked the sow in the ribs and away they went. The huge sow wouldn't go fast enough for him. He gripped her ears and dug his heels into her swollen teats where several piglets, having been roasted and eaten, left them unmilked and tender. The sow squealed and lumbered along faster, down the alley and into the main street like a miniature tank. Jason pulled hard on an ear to turn it, then rode back up the street and into the alley as if the accomplishment was nothing more than a routine bombing run. The sow was panting hard from carrying his weight. Williard poured it another beer.

"Nothing to it," Jason said smugly. "It ain't near as hard as riding a motorcycle and a lot easier than steering a chopper. You want a little time with your girl before we go?"

"May as well, as long as we're here," Williard said. He took Nellie into the back room. After a short respite, he heard a crunching, spewing noise. Now what? He dressed quickly and pulled the curtain open. Jason was feeding the sow full beer cans. She crunched the can in her mouth, then dropped it to the floor and lapped at the spewing beer like a thirsty dog.

"Aiee!" Nellie screamed. "How come you waste so much beer on pig?"

"Even a pig deserves a beer after it's been on a sortie," Jason said, giving it another. "You ready to go, brother?"

"I guess so, since you done fed that pig all the beer. Let's get on back."



Chapter Seventeen

Sgt. Williard just made it back to the compound before dark. He parked in his usual spot by the dispensary then went inside to see if Heavy and Junkman had run across any unusual medical problems during his absence.

"Not a thing," Heavy said. "That eyelid cut is the worst wound we've had in weeks. Ol' charlie has been kind of quiet lately."

"Why shouldn't they be?" Junkman said. "We've got them all clean and cured of what ails them. They're probably taking some time off to enjoy themselves."

"I hope it stays quiet," Williard said. "I want to use you two guys and Tex tomorrow on a little mission."

"Uh oh," Heavy said.

"Far out," Junkman said.

"What's the matter? All I want is for you to do a little driving for me."

"What are we going to be driving? I hope it don't ride as bumpy as that pig did," Heavy said.

"That pig is well broke in now. Next time you decide to ride it, I'll show you the technique. Nope, all you have to do is herd a few jeeps for me."

"OK, what time?" Heavy said.

"Tomorrow evening. We'll be staying in Long Binh overnight and coming back the next morning early."

"Far out," Junkman said again. Williard wasn't worried about the Junkman. He knew that he loved to drive while he was high.

"I'll be ready," Heavy said. "Say, you got any money you can loan me, Sarge? I think I'm going to run out of beer before payday."

"Sorry, Heavy. I just spent all my spare change on watches." Williard did worry about Heavy. If he followed his usual practice of



being totally wiped out by sundown, he would be useless as a driver. An idea suddenly occurred to him. "Tell you what, Heavy. As soon as we finish our business, why don't you go see Angie and hit her up for a loan? If you're half-way sober maybe she'll fix you up, if Major Burk hasn't gotten into a poker game and beat you to it."

"Hey, that's a good idea," Heavy said. "I'll take it easy today."

Tex was agreeable to the adventure, too, when Williard talked to him a little later. Williard knew he would be. Heavy's story about riding the pig had taken a little of the glitter off of his hero's mantle and he was anxious to find another way to demonstrate the superiority of Texans over other mortals.

After talking to Tex, Williard hurried to catch Captain Duarez before he retired to the officer's club for the evening. He was afraid of having him in the same area where his gang would be operating the next day and had thought of something which might pacify him.

"Hey, Doc, wait up a minute," he called, finding him just in time.

"What's up, Sarge? Not a patient, I hope. I got some urgent business to tend to." It had come to him during the day that the club had finally gotten in a few bottles of scotch and he wanted to beat the tanker battalion officers to the draw.

"Look what I got for you," Williard said, pulling a gleaming new Seiko watch from his pocket.

"All right! Thanks, Sarge. How much do I owe you?"

"Only fifty dollars," Williard said, that being more than twice what he had paid for it. At first, he had intended to simply give it to Duarez as a peace offering, but the doctor's eagerness overwhelmed both his generosity and good sense.

Duarez pulled out some bills and counted out fifty dollars in script. He put the watch on his wrist and admired its shiny new face.

"I guess you don't need to go into Long Binh tomorrow now, do you?" Williard said, hoping the overpriced bribe would work.

"Probably not, since you got this watch for me. Thanks again," Duarez said.

"Always glad to help," Williard said.



Captain Duarez resumed his walk to the club. As soon as he had a scotch in hand, he began showing off his watch to the other officers.

"Hey, that's just like mine," Major Hollis gushed. "Great prices, too. You couldn't buy this watch anywhere else for only twenty dollars."

The smile on Duarez's face faded like a speeded up sunset. He pushed his sleeve down over his new watch and made new plans to go into Long Binh with Williard the next day. He vowed to himself that he would keep an eagle eye out for him while he was there, too, and find out what he was up to.

At sick call the next morning Williard let Heavy handle most of the cases while he supervised, both to give him additional experience for after he left the unit and to keep him out of the beer stored in his blood cooler. As the morning wore on, though, Heavy seemed to have to retreat to his lab more and more often to perform one test or another. He managed to get almost half his usual load on by noon, but a fine meal of dehydrated potatoes and greasy meatballs soaked up most of the beer. Williard's other medics grumbled as they ate. It's probably about time to condemn some more steaks and incinerate them, Williard thought. The men would deserve it after helping him with the jeep caper.

Williard took his usual nap after chow, then rounded up Tex, Heavy and Junkman for the trip to Long Binh. Just as he was putting the jeep in gear, Captain Duarez came running up.

"Wait, I'm going with you!"

Aw shit, Williard thought, immediately deducing the reason for Duarez's aggravated expression and his desire to accompany them.

Why didn't I just give him the damned watch? Too late now, though. The Doc was mad and was almost certainly heading in to see the colonel. Duarez hopped into the back seat with Tex and Junkman. Neither had much to say to the other on the drive in.

"You can drop me off at brigade headquarters, Sarge," Duarez said after they had been stopped at the main Long Binh gate to make sure clips had been pulled from the three forty five pistols Williard, Duarez and Tex were packing. Early in the war, this practice had become routine after accidental gunshot wounds began causing



almost as many casualties as Viet Cong rocket and mortar attacks. The gate guards didn't have to bother with Heavy. His armament consisted of a number of beers concealed about his person.

Williard pulled up in front of the medical brigade headquarters. While Duarez was getting out, he spied a face peeking from a window of the Quonset hut. "Hey, Doc, check the oil for me before you go, will you? I think the colonel's watching."

"Right," Duarez said. "Where are you guys headed?"

"Over to the NCO club first," Williard answered before thinking that he might be giving away free information. "I got to meet someone there. "Oops! "Uh, after that, we'll be around and about."

"Right." Duarez closed the hood of the jeep and strode purposefully into the headquarters.

"He's up to something no good, I just know it," Duarez said to Colonel Pinkerton a few minutes later.

"I don't doubt that," Pinkerton replied. "Say, take a look at my new watch. Only twenty dollars." He held his wrist out to show Duarez his new Seiko.

"Very nice, sir. About Sgt. Williard--"

"Yes, Sgt. Williard. Don't worry, Captain. That sergeant is going to be taken care of very shortly. However, it wouldn't hurt to have a little more information on him before I take action. Do you have a suggestion, perhaps?"

"Yes, sir. He has three of his men with him today and he's being very circumspect about their plans. If I had some transportation to follow him, I might could find out what he's up to."

"Say no more, Captain. I was planning on some random checks of vehicles around the brigade today anyway. I'll drive you myself if you know where Sgt. Williard is now."

"He said they were going to the NCO club first."

"Good. That will fit right in with my itinerary. You just can't trust those NCO's with their maintenance once they get vehicles out of the motor pool."



"I know, sir. That's why I checked the oil level in Williard's jeep before I reported to you."

"I saw that you did, Captain. We'll win this war yet with that kind of devotion to duty. Are you ready?"

"Yes, sir."

Colonel Pinkerton spoke to his aide then led Captain Duarez out to his own personal jeep. Duarez noticed that the colonel had added some improvements since his inspection of the dispensary the day of the jungle juice party. Besides the tinted windshields, green metallic flake bumpers, imitation wooden steering wheel and custom fitted hubcaps it had been equipped with then, it now sported a fuzzy red dashboard, a red canopy and white seat covers. The jeep was so clean and shiny it might have come directly from an assembly line, supposing that an assembly line would turn out such an apparition.

"Go ahead and get in, Captain. Be careful of the seat covers. I don't want to get them wrinkled or dirty."

"Yes, sir." Duarez said, climbing gingerly into the passenger seat. He felt as if he were sitting on a rare Chippendale chair. The colonel checked the oil, radiator fluid and tire pressure then got behind the wheel. He drove away at a cautious ten miles an hour to avoid stirring up dust that might stick to his pride and joy.

"I got to take a piss," Heavy said. It was getting on toward evening and the beer he had consumed while waiting for Sgt. Williard's brother to show up was telling on him. He went outside to locate the piss tube. While he was occupied, he glanced up and saw the hood of a jeep pop open. There was Captain Duarez, inspecting it while Colonel Pinkerton stood by taking notes. Uh oh. He ran back inside.

"Sarge! Sarge! I just seen Cap'n Duarez out there, and he's got the colonel with him. What you reckon he's up to?"

"No damn good, probably." Shit. Were they following him?

"Who's up to no good?" Jason asked, appearing on the scene. He was still wearing jungle fatigues rather than his flight suit.

"Hey, brother!" Williard greeted him. "It's that oil wiping



colonel who's up to no good. He's out in the parking lot with one of my Docs. I bet they're following me."

"Why would they be doing that? They're not on to us already, are they?"

"I don't think so, but the Doc is in a bad mood. I sold him a Seiko yesterday for fifty dollars. He probably found out what they really cost and got the red ass. What do we do now?"

"The first thing to do is not panic," Jason said. "How do you go about getting a beer around this place? I've done worked up a thirst flying choppers all day."

"I'll get you one," Heavy said. "Say, are you Jumpin' Jase?"

"That's what they call me sometimes."

"Uh oh. I sure am glad jeeps can't fly." Heavy hurried to the bar and gathered an armful of beer. The Vietnamese waitresses had not showed up for work that day and no one knew why.

"Far out," Junkman said, staring into space.

"I'm Tex and this is Junkman," Tex said. "That is Heavy bringing the beer."

"Glad to meet you guys. Jim, I've got my boys standing by. It's getting close to dark and the cargo plane just landed a bit ago. It's being unloaded and refueled now. Why don't we swing by and pick them up then get on with this caper?"

"What do we do about the Doc and the colonel?"

"Just tell me where you're parked. I'll go out and get your vehicle, then swing right back to the entrance here and pick you guys up, then we'll die die mau."

"What if they follow us?"

"Does the colonel know what a yellow ball is?"

"Is that a new venereal disease?" Heavy asked, returning with the beer. "I never run across a case of that yet."

"You never will," Williard said, shuddering. When his brother began talking about the yellow ball, he knew he was going to be in for



a wild ride. Best not to mention it to the other men, though. He might wind up having to highjack the jeeps by himself. "Go ahead, Jason. We'll be waiting."

Jason chugged down his beer and strolled outside.

Tex, Junkman and Heavy followed Williard toward the exit. He stopped for a moment at the bar and they watched innocently as he downed a double shot of straight bourbon to prepare himself for Jason's driving. A honk came from outside. The medics burst out the exit and scrambled into the jeep. Dust and gravel spewed from its back wheels as it roared away.

"There they go!" Duarez shouted at Colonel Pinkerton, causing him to drop a dipstick in the dirt.

The colonel looked up just in time to see a jeep speeding away from the entrance to the club. He blinked. At first it appeared that he was seeing double, as if there were two Sgt. Williards in the front seat. Then he noticed the lieutenant's bars on the collar of the driver's fatigue jacket and the five stripes on the sleeve of the one riding shotgun. "Who is that officer in the driver's seat?" Pinkerton asked. "He looks just like Sgt. Williard. Is that his brother?"

"It must be," Duarez cried, jumping into the passenger side of the colonel's jeep. He leaned forward and made urging motions, as if he could induce it to take off without a driver.

"Don't wrinkle my seat covers!" The colonel shouted. He climbed in more carefully, twisted the starter button and gave chase. The medical jeep was already almost out of sight.

Jason glanced into the rear view mirror and saw that they were being followed. He speeded up, careened around a deuce and a half, horn blaring, keeping his gaze fixed on the imaginary yellow ball he began visualizing. Headlights coming from the opposite direction challenged him momentarily then veered into the ditch running alongside the road when that driver realized the oncoming vehicle was giving no quarter. The deuce and a half wavered and slewed, almost running the colonel off the road as he attempted to pass.

Colonel Pinkerton stepped harder on the gas pedal and got around the truck, flinching every time he hit a bump in the road, as if the shock absorbers were his children being punished. The customized motor under the hood of his jeep hummed with power. He began gaining on the medics.



"Hold on guys!" Jason shouted. He stomped down hard on the brake, raising a dust cloud as the jeep swiveled end for end and came to a sliding halt, facing back in the direction they had come from. He tromped on the accelerator and zoomed back that way, raising more dust as the wheels spun and spewed laterite chunks behind them.

Colonel Pinkerton, blinded and choking, halted his vehicle. Laterite gravel tinkled against the hood as his quarry charged past at a speed approaching that needed to catapult a jet off a carrier. More dust enveloped them, coating the colonel's jeep with a thick red layer of grime and making it impossible to see to drive. By the time the double dust cloud had settled, the medics were long gone.

At the moment, Pinkerton was more concerned with the condition of his once immaculate vehicle. "Damn it, Captain, now see what you made me do. I got my jeep all dirty." He was practically crying, as if besides being paddled, his children had also been tarred and feathered.

"I'll wash it for you, sir," Duarez said, trying to make amends.

"You certainly will, Captain. There's a hose next to the officer's club. I'll just go in and have a drink while you're doing that. In the meantime, start thinking about Sgt. Williard's replacement. I'm going to bust him for reckless driving and endangerment of a government vehicle, among other things. He isn't going to get out of this one, and neither is his brother. Well, maybe his brother will, since he's an officer. I just don't understand his actions, though. Can you imagine, he might have wrecked us both? Think how that would hamper the war effort, with two jeeps out of action."

The colonel drove cautiously out of the settling dust cloud, holding the wooden steering wheel with one hand and brushing red euchre from the fuzzy dashboard with the other. Sgt. Williard was going to pay for this, he thought, or my name wasn't Colonel Horace L. Pinkerton. Then it came to him. Sgt. Williard hadn't been driving. It might be harder than he thought to hang a reckless driving charge on him, although since the jeep was assigned to the dispensary, the endangerment charge was certainly valid.

"That was almost as much fun as riding a motorcycle," Jason said as he headed toward the airfield. "That colonel is a candy ass, though, If it had been me, I would have run me off the road when we came back from the other direction."



"I'm glad you weren't him," Heavy said, gulping down a beer he had brought from the club.

"Far out," Junkman said. "It was like flying without even being in an airplane."

"Like riding a bucking bronco," Tex said approvingly.

"It was fun now, but wait til tomorrow," Williard said glumly. "They recognized us for sure."

"So what?" Jason said. "I was the one driving. I'll take the heat and let the old man get me out of it when I bring him back a new jeep."

"You're all heart, Jase, but you don't know Pinkerton. He'll probably charge me with failure to check the oil when we stopped to turn around. I never seen a man so in love with vehicles."

Jason patted Williard on the shoulder. "You worry too much. Tell him I checked the oil while the dust was still in the air and he couldn't see me." He steered around a curve and up to the edge of the airfield where the big cargo plane was parked and ready.

Three marine enlisted men and several cargo handlers ran from the bowels of the plane and crowded into the jeep, one on top of the other until its wheels sagged under the weight. "We got to hurry, Jase," one of them said. "We got the air controller bribed, but he can only hold us here another hour or so."

"We'll make it," Jason said. "Just watch and remember the way back in case we get separated."

"You hear that, Heavy?" Williard warned. "Quit drinking that beer and watch where we're going."

"I'm watching." Heavy chugalugged his beer and tossed the can over the side.

"You got any more of that?" One of the marines asked.

Heavy pulled more beer from the bottom pockets of his fatigue jacket and passed them around. Jason pulled to a halt in the officer's club parking lot. The medics and marines scurried overboard and ran for the herd of parked jeeps.



A sudden roar of motors being started caught Captain Duarez's attention from where he was just finishing washing the colonel's jeep. He looked up and saw the last of a gang of scurrying figures scattering around the parking lot and climbing into quiescent jeeps. Sgt. Williard was among them. He threw the hose away and sprinted toward the club entrance. "Colonel Pinkerton, they're back, they're back!" He yelled as he burst inside the club.

Colonel Pinkerton looked up from where he was regaling a captive second lieutenant on the importance of radiator fluid and oil levels and saw Captain Duarez pushing through the crowd. "And that's how you win wars," Pinkerton said to the befuddled officer. "Let's go, Captain."

"Hurry!" Duarez urged.

"What's the rush?" Pinkerton said. "If they're back at the NCO club, let's just call the MP's and have them arrested."

"No, no! You don't understand. They're here! And they're stealing our jeeps!"

Blasphemy! Colonel Pinkerton sprinted for the exit like a mother cat bounding out of a cave to defend her kittens.

Outside, Jason's unerring instinct for dangerous living steered him directly to Colonel Pinkerton's metallic child. He jumped inside and thumbed the starter, delayed momentarily by having to hunt for it through the fuzzy red upholstery attached to the dashboard. Most of the others were already revved up and on their way. He gunned the jeep into motion, almost running down Duarez and Pinkerton, who were just emerging from the exit.

"My jeep! Someone's stealing my jeep!" Pinkerton screamed, jumping out of the way. A familiar, mustached face flashed briefly into his vision, sitting behind the wheel.

"Someone's stealing all the jeeps," Duarez said, stating the obvious.

"It's Sgt. Williard!" Pinkerton yelled, not being able to tell the brothers apart. "Go call the MP's, you idiot!"

Duarez sprinted for the entrance to the club.

Over the sound of receding motors, Jason heard the cry to call out the MP's. Grimly, he visualized a yellow ball just about where the



power lines drooped to their lowest point from the power pole before connecting to the wall of the club. He put the pedal to the metal and took dead aim, as if he were in a jet making a crucial bombing run. The lines parted with the greatest of ease, killing all the lights, both inside and outside.

Chaos descended over the gathering of officers. Half of them thought an attack was in progress what with all the shouting and began running for bunkers, bumping into each other in the dark. The other half took the opportunity to rob the bar. They grabbed bottles and headed for their jeeps, they thought, but only an empty parking lot greeted them. The jeeps were a half-mile away by then.

"Where's the MP's?" Colonel Pinkerton shouted into the blackness. "My poor jeep. I just know it's going to be mistreated. Awk!" An officer, stumbling around looking for where he thought he had parked, bowled him off his feet.

"The phones are out," Captain Duarez said, helping Colonel Pinkerton to his feet as he recognized his voice.

"Well, somebody do something!" Colonel Pinkerton ordered. He yanked at what little hair he had left on his head in frustration.

"Yes, sir. Er, what should we do, sir?"

"Find me some transportation, for one thing. Do you expect me to walk back to my quarters? I'm not a grunt."

Flashlights began playing around the parking lot and order was gradually restored. There was not a jeep in sight, and when the MP's finally arrived, no one had any idea where they had gone. Eventually, a borrowed deuce and a half was used to transport the officers back to their quarters. Duarez accompanied Colonel Pinkerton.

Pinkerton was livid. "Captain Duarez, you will stay here tonight and help the MP's search the compound. In the morning, I want you to write up a full report on that thieving sergeant while I call General Ware and tell him about how he's vandalizing crucial transportation." The colonel seethed, steam almost visibly shooting out his ears.

"Did you recognize Sgt. Williard, sir?"

"I sure as hell did. This time he went too far. Theft of army property. Reckless driving. Failure to properly maintain said stolen property; I know goddamned well he didn't take time to check the oil



in my jeep he was making his getaway in. My god, what if it was low?"

Duarez wondered about the logic and legal aspects of not maintaining stolen property, but at least he knew he wouldn't have to wash the colonel's jeep again that night.

"Come on, get them vehicles in here, quick," the cargo aircraft commander urged. One by one, the hijacked jeeps were driven directly into the cargo bay. The marine enlisted men and cargo handlers quickly blocked the wheels and strapped them down. The last one in was Jason, driving the colonel's jeep.

"Man, what a beauty," Jason said admiringly when he saw it in the light of the cargo hatch. "The old man might promote me to captain when he sees this one."

Williard was appalled. "Pinkerton is going to promote me to private if anybody recognized us. That's his personal jeep you're driving. You might as well have castrated him as stolen it."

"Well, fuck him if he can't take a joke," Jason said.

"I think I heard someone yell 'Williard'," Heavy said.

"Uh, oh," Jason said.

"Yeah," Sgt. Williard said. "I'm fucked. The colonel ain't going to let this slide. Jason, how come you took the colonel's jeep?"

"It was too pretty to pass up, even in the dark. Hell, I bet the old man don't walk another step as long as he's over here," Jason said.

"Clear the bay!" One of the marines called. "We're getting out of here."

"We better get out of here, too, and find a place to hide." Williard suggested. "Not that it will do any good. That combat unit I was talking about putting in for will probably be the Long Binh jail."

"Why don't you come over and spend the night with me and the chopper boys?" Jason said. "They don't care whose jeep got swiped. Besides, hardly any of them are flying right now, what with the cease fire."



"Do they have any beer?" Heavy asked.

"Ballentine's for sure."

"That's OK, I got something to cure a Ballentine hangover. Let's go, Sarge."

"Might as well. I won't mind getting busted so bad if I got a hangover when it happens."

"What's this about a cease fire?" Tex asked. He was still hoping for another chance to use his pistol.

"Haven't you guys heard? The VC, ARVN and us all agreed to stand down for the Tet holidays," Jason said.

"That's too bad," Williard said. "I was hoping maybe the colonel would get shot so he couldn't courts-martial me."

"Shit, brother, don't give up hope yet. We'll get drunk with the chopper pilots, then tomorrow I'll get them to swear you was all with us the whole night long." Jason promised.

"Thanks, but it probably won't help. If we had just blown up his headquarters and raped all the nurses, we could probably finagle our way out of this, but he ain't going to stand for losing his jeep."

"Speaking of nurses, I wonder what Angie's doing?" Heavy said.

"I hope she's with Major Burk. If I'm gonna be a private, I'm going to need all my money."

"You guys worry too much," Jason said. "The old man has been threatening to bust me back to second lieutenant ever since my first week in country."

"Second Lieutenant would look good right now," Williard said.

Chapter Eighteen

If Colonel Pinkerton had not been so upset at the theft of his jeep, he might have thought to alert the gate guards to watch for the



renegade medics, but by the time it occurred to him the next morning, they had already passed through and were on their way back to the tanker compound. The colonel had stayed up most of the night haranguing the MP's to locate his jeep, the medics, or both or either. None of them were found, and he finally retired to get some sleep. When he appeared at brigade headquarters that afternoon, he expected to be smothered with reports of stolen vehicles from his officers. Surprisingly, his was one of the few that seemed to have gone missing. Had he thought about it, he would have realized that since most of the others had been misappropriated to begin with, it was hard to justify a stolen vehicle report.

General Ware wasn't in when Pinkerton tried to call, so he simply drew up an addendum to the courts-martial request for Sgt. Williard he had previously filed and had it hand delivered to division headquarters.

General Ware frowned when he read the list of added charges against Sgt. Williard that he found on his desk when he returned. He called Colonel Pinkerton. "Colonel, are you certain it was Sgt. Williard who stole your jeep?"

"Just as certain as I am that an engine won't run without oil, sir," Colonel Pinkerton said.

"All right, let me look into this before I take any action. I want to be certain that I'm doing the right thing."

"Fine, sir. Just let me know when you want that wild man over there and I'll send the MP's after him."

"I'll certainly let you know, Colonel. Goodbye for now." General Ware shook his head and frowned some more. Presently he began to make some more calls.

The medics arrived back at their compound just in time for morning sick call. Williard went through the motions, but he just couldn't work up any enthusiasm. His spirits were so low that he actually called Captain Harkness in to consult on a couple of routine cases. He even thought about turning sick call over to Captain Duarez. When he asked Harkness where he was, the answer confirmed his worst fears.



"He called me early this morning and said he wouldn't be back today," Harkness said petulantly. "Something about having to give a deposition to the MP's. I hope he isn't in trouble. I have to have someone to cover for me when I go to Bangkok."

That settled it. Williard just about gave up hope. With Duarez and Pinkerton both testifying, even Jason and his friends probably couldn't help. He turned back to his patients. Every now and then, he looked longingly down at the sergeant first class stripes on each of his sleeves as if they were terminal cancer patients barely hanging onto life.

Sick call was compounded by the fact that none of the Vietnamese cleaning women had shown up for work and the medics had to police up their own trash and wash their own instruments. As the morning progressed, he heard mumbles from his patients. None of the mess hall KP's or shit burners had reported for work either, nor had the mama-sans come in to clean hooches. Williard wondered about all the absences until he remembered that it was the Tet holidays. The workers must all be taking a day or two off to celebrate. In fact, Williard was to learn later, it was January 31st, the eve of the giant Tet offensive of 1968 and all the Vietnamese workers were off making patty cake with the local Viet Cong.

Williard was so depressed that he didn't even feel like drinking much, or playing poker either. He went to bed early. Surprisingly, he noticed that Heavy was still awake, when normally he was dead drunk by sundown.

"What's wrong, Heavy? Wouldn't Angie give you a loan?" He asked.

"No. That bitch had already loaned it all to Major Burk. I don't think I'm going to see her anymore." Heavy sipped cautiously at the beer he was holding, like a pauper hoarding his last few coins. He looked as sad and apprehensive as Williard felt.

"I'll see if I can't float a loan for you tomorrow," Williard said, feeling sorry for him.

"Thanks, Sarge. I appreciate it, but it's only a day or so til payday. I can last that long if I stretch out what I got left. Besides, this is the second day in a row I've been up past sundown. I may get to like it. Say, where's the rest of the guys?"

"They all went to the club to play poker and brag about stealing all those jeeps."



"Even Junkman? I didn't know he played poker."

"He doesn't. He's in the bunker. All that beer he drank yesterday has got him paranoid again."

"He'll get over it pretty soon," Heavy said. "I saw him hitting on a big bomber a while ago. You know, he ought not to smoke so much of that shit."

The pot calling the kettle black, Williard thought. He found himself unable to care much either way. Soon enough the men would either have to straighten out their act or become privates along with him. "You ought not to drink so much either, Heavy, but what the hell, we all got our problems."

Heavy eyed his sergeant, his relative soberness suddenly making him realize how much he respected him. "You don't look so good, Sarge. Are you worried about what's gonna happen with those jeeps?"

"No, just sleepy," Williard lied. "I think I'll turn in."

"Me, too." Heavy drained his last beer.

Williard shucked his fatigues and turned out the light. He didn't think he would be able to sleep, but the last ten days of activity had enervated him more than he realized. Within a few minutes, he was dead to the world.

Just about midnight, a tremendous thunderclap coming from the center of the huge Long Binh compound woke everyone within a ten-mile radius. A garbage worker at the huge ammo dump there had left a timed charge on a hundred pounds of explosives that he had smuggled into the area in bits and pieces over the last week. It blew up three trucks already loaded with artillery rounds, scattering them in all directions, and set several structures on fire. The blaze quickly spread to other buildings and the heat began cooking off the artillery rounds. A chain reaction raced through the dump like splitting neutrons in an atomic bomb. The giant Tet offensive of 1968 had begun.

The first huge explosion tumbled Williard from his cot, interrupting a dream in which Colonel Pinkerton was chasing him down a road in a jeep, coming ever closer, the motor roaring like a



lion after a gazelle while his feet kept getting tangled up in piles of shiny Seiko watches. He blinked his eyes open and pawed around in the darkened tent, trying to shake off the remnants of the dream. A scattering of gunfire brought him to full consciousness. He searched for his Zippo in order to get some light to see by then suddenly realized he didn't need it. An amber wavering glow of some kind was flowing into the hooch, growing brighter and brighter. He grabbed his boots and fatigues and weapon and ran for the bunker. Outside, a pillar of fire and flame from the explosion twisted in the wind lighting the area even from ten miles away. A multitude of other winking lights and distance-muffled noise coincided with exploding artillery rounds. He threw on his fatigues and laced up his boots while the other medics stumbled into the bunker to join him. Junkman, of course was already there. He gazed out at the flames. "Far out! This is the best stuff I ever had."

Secondary explosions began to sound like intermittent sonic booms from an air show. A tracer round went overhead, fire-red in the night, then came the loud stark 'wham' of a mortar round exploding nearby.

"Goddamn, we're being hit!" Captain Harkness said excitedly.

A lethal stutter of machine gun and rifle fire split the night air like coughing hyenas. More tracer rounds passed close by, whining through the air like a wood drill being rapidly turned on and off. Pinpricks of light from the perimeter guards flickered like fireflies as they fired their rifles.

"Get your kits ready," Williard ordered. "We're going to have casualties this time." His thoughts leaped ahead, picturing which medics to send out and which to hold back.

"Where's Heavy?" Someone asked. "Did anyone bring him in?"

"I'm here," Heavy said. "Goddamn, you guys weren't kidding. We really do get hit sometimes, don't we?" More mortar rounds exploded over the compound, shaking the ground and drowning out his voice. Bits of dirt sifted down from the sandbags overhead.

The rifle and machine-gun fire increased in volume to a steady, snapping roar.

"Goddamn, that's coming from the gate!" Tex yelled over the noise. "Them bastards must be really trying to break in this time." He chambered a round in his forty-five.



A tanker driver burst into the bunker. "Casualties! We need some medics!"

"Dum-Dum, you and Blake haul ass with some stretchers," Williard ordered. Now he could hear the cry of 'Medic!' in the distance. The firing increased in volume again, echoing back and forth over the compound. A mortar round hit one of the full tankers, puncturing the tank and setting it on fire. It blew up in a huge fireball.

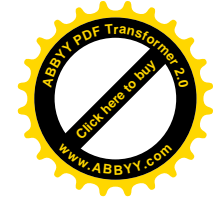
The Viet Cong, encouraged by reports from the daily help who told them that the troops inside were soft, inexperienced logistics soldiers who wouldn't be able to resist a determined attack weren't simply harassing the compound this time. It was an all out attack, led by Nguyen Nguyen himself. Casualties began arriving at the dispensary, borne on stretchers by troopers crouched low, with frightened expressions on their faces that resembled six year olds just coming out of a haunted house on Halloween night.

Williard and Captain Harkness went to work. Williard blanched at the sight of the first casualty. The trooper's face resembled a hunk of raw hamburger drenched in catsup. A red stream spurted from an artery in his torn scalp. "Heavy, get me some blood!" Williard shouted. He pressed a thick, sulfa-impregnated bandage to the wounded man's head.

Heavy ran for the dispensary and hurried back with an armload of whole blood. A close miss tinged off the top of his helmet, throwing him backward to the ground. He rolled over to his hands and knees and gathered up the bags of blood he had dropped and began transfusing the worst hit patients, running from stretcher to stretcher, beer for once forgotten.

Rifle and machine gun fire sounded louder as the invading Viet Cong swarmed over the gate guards, taking casualties, but making it inside. More of their cadre followed, running past the bodies of the slain soldiers. A thin line of hastily organized riflemen backed up under the onslaught, some of them falling as they retreated. The battle moved forward, toward the center of the compound where the dispensary was located.

Williard heard the drumming of bullets slamming into the sandbags of the bunker. He looked up just in time to see a red splotch appear like magic on the trouser leg of Zapper's fatigues. He gasped and collapsed on top of the wounded man he had been working on. We're going to be overrun, Williard thought. He glanced quickly away from where he was working over a sucking chest wound to make sure



his rifle was nearby then bent back over his patient. He felt as if he needed to have four hands. He wanted to run help Zapper but couldn't turn loose from what he was already doing. From the corner of his eye he saw Harkness scramble away from a patient he had just finished with and crawl toward the wounded medic, keeping his head low. Nearby, an M-16 clattered through a clip on full automatic. Not long now.

Jason was not only awakened when the ammunition dump went up, he was thrown off his bunk and clear across the room. He bounced off a footlocker, cutting a gash in his head. He thought momentarily that he was back at Chu Lai where the airfield was regularly rocketed by the Viet Cong. His head buzzed. He felt of his scalp and it came away bloody. Quickly, he wrapped a handkerchief around the wound and began helping the chopper pilots he was staying with to their feet. Most of them were stunned or hurt. Close by, he heard rockets scream down and explode, just like up north. Them goddamn gomers are breaking the truce! "Come on, let's get our asses in the air!" He shouted. That was always his first reaction to hostile fire. He wanted to get up to where he could see an enemy target and bomb the shit out of it. He wished he had gone back with the cargo plane so he could use an F-4 on the lying little fuckers but right now, that didn't matter. The important thing was to get what was available into the air. "Come on," he yelled again to the young warrant officers. He ran from the hooch toward the parked attack helicopters. Only three of the warrant officers followed. The rest were too dazed or wounded to function.

The pyrotechnics of the exploding ammo dump reminded Jason of his recent flight over Hanoi, where every north Vietnamese citizen in the country had some sort of weapon they fired at encroaching jets, from SAMs to slingshots. He fell to the ground as a chopper went up in flames from a rocket explosion, then ran for one that was untouched, not bothering to see who followed. Only one of the normal three man enlisted crew had made it to the undamaged chopper and there was no pilot. Jason didn't let that bother him. He climbed up into the canopy and strapped in. When no one else showed up, he fired the engine, glanced at the barely familiar gauges and was airborne within seconds, working the pedals and stick as if he had been flying choppers for years. When it came to flying, he was almost psychic, one with his craft, no matter what it was.

The chopper was already armed with rockets, but he had only one of the enlisted machine gunners aboard. That would do for now, though. He thumbed the radio switch to the frequency and call sign



he had been taught the day before by a young warrant officer.

"Hellhound two here. Give me a target!"

The air controller came on the frequency.

"Upwind from that big fire, Hellhound two. Watch for tracer rounds coming in from the north. Put some rockets on them fuckers, they're trying to break through the wire."

"Roger." Jason didn't bother to mention that he wasn't the regular Hellhound Two. He tilted the chopper as he had been taught, lined up his imaginary yellow ball and released his rockets right on target, ignoring the ground fire that followed him all the way down and up. Just when he thought he had gotten clear, a line of smoking holes suddenly appeared to the left of the panel, punching into it with a sound like a berserk jackhammer. One of the bullets tore into his right arm, fracturing the upper arm bone. Jason felt the blow as if a 300-pound linebacker had plowed into his side. It jerked his body violently against his harness straps and flung his hand off the controls. The helicopter wavered unsteadily. He felt his arm go numb at first, then flare with pain as he forced his hand back onto the control stick.

"Hellhound Two. You still with us?"

"I'm here," Jason's tongue was thick with pain. "Give me another target. I still got two rockets and one arm left."

"Hold one." The controller went off the air for a moment, then came back on, his voice urgent. "We just got a report of a break through in a tanker battalion northwest of the main compound. They're in trouble. Head due west of the fire from the ammo dump, about ten clicks. Go in low and see what you can do. We've lost contact."

"Roger. On my way." Goddamn, that's Jim's compound! Jason studied the gauges on the panel of his chopper to see what damage the hit had caused, ignoring the pain from his broken arm. Uh oh. One of the rounds must have pierced the fuel tank. He made a couple of fast mental calculations and decided that he could get there even if he couldn't get back. Fuckit. Jason never worried about the small shit. "You there, Sarge?" He called over the intercom to the machine gunner.

"On line, sir. Are you that straight wing guy I met yesterday?"



"Yeah. You got any complaints?"

"Not me. Where we headed?"

"Ten clicks west, no about six now. A compound there has got some trouble. We ain't likely to make it back to base, and I only got two rockets left. You game?"

"Lead on, Lieutenant. Just tell me when. You ever thought about joining the army?"

"I can't. My right arm is broke. I couldn't raise it to take the oath. Keep that MG hot."

"You got it."

Jason poured on the coals and began losing altitude, a picture of the Long Binh compound as seen from the air in his head, a huge raggedly circular area of construction with lesser areas separated by jungle stringing west and north like broken beads from a necklace. The tanker battalion was at the very end of the string. It wasn't hard to spot. By this time, several oil-laden trucks were blazing, lighting up the whole area. Machine gun and rifle fire crisscrossed the compound, but the most heavily concentrated firing was almost directly toward the center. From above, he gauged the origin of incoming and outgoing tracers and blazed in with his two remaining rockets onto the heaviest concentration of incoming streaks singing their red paths toward the center of the compound where he knew his brother must be working.

The attacking enemy looked up and trained their guns on the descending chopper. Bullets rattled off the armored undercarriage. The rockets exploded into blossoms of red fury. On target! Jason pulled away, circled, and then hovered very briefly.

"Your turn, Sarge," Jason said, gritting his teeth. He felt as if acid was burning its way through his arm. He came in very low on his next pass, tilting the chopper to give the machine gunner a good firing angle. A hail of bullets crossed in the air. A line of them entered the canopy, shattering the Plexiglas and ripping downward as Jason tried to pull the chopper up. A bullet shattered his lower leg, breaking both the tibia and fibula. He lost control of the pedal that leg controlled, but by then it didn't matter. The engine was coughing away the last of its fuel.

"We're going down," Jason warned the gunner. "Keep firing. I'll try to drop us by the medics." Crap. Choppers were worse than



jets for getting shot to pieces. His craft slid toward the ground and crashed to the earth, just to the front of the medical bunker, and lay smoking like a wounded dragon. There was no explosion, since there was no fuel left. The machine gunner continued to fire. Jason was helpless, unable to move with a broken arm and a broken leg.

Williard heard the helicopter overhead and saw the two rockets explode in the midst of the Viet Cong, still concentrated from the bottle neck at the gate. Thank God! They were still in trouble, though. He flinched as a bullet creased his neck. The remnants of the attacking force were still moving forward, unaware that the rockets had killed their comrades in the rear. A rifleman stumbled through the aid area, his weapon empty. "They're still coming!" He screamed.

Williard grabbed for his rifle. Short dark figures were running toward him, bent low. He let off a burst on full automatic then dropped prone to reload. As he raised back up to his knees, he caught a glimpse of Tex scrambling up the side of the bunker, gripping his pistol in one hand and climbing with the other. He emptied another clip. Above him, from the top of the bunker he heard the bark of Tex's pistol, the shots coming at spaced intervals as if he were firing for practice on a range. At each shot, a figure tumbled to the ground. Tex hadn't been telling yarns about how good he was. Williard fired off his last clip and drew his own pistol. He looked around. Baby Blake was down, clutching his side, but beside him, his medics were still working on the wounded, ignoring incoming rounds. Drunkards they might be, pill-popping, hooker-chasing miscreants who goofed off whenever they could, but in the crunch, they were magnificent. He had never been so proud of them.

The remaining enemy was very close now, but their firing began to dwindle. Jason's rockets and machine gun fire had arrived just in time to break up the invading Viet Cong into pockets of isolated, black pajama clad little brown men who suddenly realized they were doomed. A new line of riflemen formed, moved forward and began mopping up.

Williard, grateful for whomever it was in the downed chopper that had saved their asses, ran to see if anyone was still alive there. He pried open the door and climbed inside. Jason looked up at him from where he was slumped at the controls. His face was white from his his bleeding wounds, but he had his pistol drawn, ready to fight to the last if any of those little fuckers tried to climb in with him.

Williard recognized his brother. "Put that popgun away," he said over the lump that had suddenly grown in his throat. "Crap, can't you even fly a helicopter without getting shot down?"



"Who cares?" Jason said. "I done made me a bunch more crispy critters. Don't forget to do a body count for me." The pistol dropped from his hand and he knew nothing else until he woke up the next day on a hospital plane bound for Japan.

Williard called for help and got his brother out of the broken machine and splinted his fractured bones. The machine gunner, unhurt but slightly wacky from all the near misses staggered outside. "Goddamn. I hope that marine got his million dollar wound. I don't never want to fly with him again. Them warrant officers are crazy, but this sumbitch acts like there's no tomorrow."

"Be glad you weren't in an F-4 with him," Williard said.

Chapter Nineteen

Smoke was still coiling wispily from the ruined oil tankers several days later. It had been a hectic time for Williard and his remaining medics. There had been so many casualties all over the country that evac helicopters were at a premium and used only for the most critically wounded. Williard had to move his men out of their hooch into corners and crannies of the dispensary and use their bunks for the less seriously hurt until space could be found for them on the dustoffs. The last of them were just now being evacuated. He looked up at the departing dustoff, the bright red cross on its side growing smaller as it rose, like an omen of the little time he would remain in charge here. The Viet Cong were on the run and Colonel Pinkerton would be getting ready to attend to him now.

It's too bad, he thought, picking at the bandage on his neck where the bullet had creased him. His unit and his men were working now as if they were taking the war seriously, just as he was. The atmosphere in the dispensary was palpably different, as if the men had been to a revival and caught the spirit. He had them working overtime to make up for the absence of Zapper and Baby Blake and Dum-Dum, who had all been evacuated and Captain Duarez, who had still not returned. None of them complained, nor even seemed to mind the extra work. He saw that even Captain Harkness was caught up in the euphoria of being alive and having a purpose. He had performed admirably during the attack and was still busy caring for patients not seriously hurt enough to be sent to the hospital. Williard



thought part of that might be because Junie had not returned, but he wasn't even talking about Bangkok anymore, so perhaps not.

All the clubs were shut down. No beer or liquor had arrived for days, which was a good thing since he had appropriated all the loose codeine for medical use rather than hangovers. He hardly recognized Heavy, since he had never seen him sober before, and Junkman, who had put up his junk for the duration. Williard was amazed at how clear and bright everything appeared and how good he felt about the way his men had performed in a crisis, but he knew it wouldn't last. The fighting was almost over in the Long Binh area and a reckoning was sure to come soon.

He watched the chopper until it faded into the distant haze, then went back inside the dispensary. Time to make rounds again, then get on with sick call. Their remaining bed patients had just been moved from the hooch into the dispensary where he had Toothless and Tex tending to them. Toothless was happy to finally have a little work to do. Tex wasn't quite that happy. Just as the last of the Viet Cong were being destroyed, a stray round had knocked his pistol out of his hand and ruined it.

"Mop, get me some more charts ready. I'll be back in a minute," Williard said.

"Right away, Sarge," Mop said eagerly.

"Thanks, Mop." Williard socked him lightly on the shoulder and moved on down the hallway.

Tex was changing a dressing, using his bandaged right hand sparingly. His homely face seemed even longer than usual.

"Tex, you look downer than a grunt with a hundred pound pack. Is your hand hurting?" Williard said.

Tex finished taping gauze over a trooper's wounded arm. He held his own wrapped hand out and wiggled the three fingers peeking from the end of it. "No, it's getting better," He said. "It's just that I feel naked without a shooting iron to carry. When can you get me another one, Sarge?"

"Probably not soon," Williard admitted. "There must have been an awful lot of equipment lost the last few days and everyone and his cousin will be trying to get it replaced first."

"I sure hope them Viet Cong don't try nothing beforehand," Tex



said.

"Me, too," Williard agreed. He went on to talk to Sandy and Heavy for a moment then returned to the front office. Just as he was beginning to work through a thin gathering of sick troopers, a jeep sporting the MP insignia drove up and parked in front of the dispensary. An MP captain and sergeant got out and entered. Williard glanced up from his charts. *Uh oh.*

"Are you Sgt. Williard?" the sergeant asked.

"That's what my name tag says."

"We have orders to transport you immediately to brigade headquarters," the captain said.

"Am I under arrest?" Williard asked, just for the record.

"Just protective custody for now, Sergeant. Come along."

Oh well, it was nice while it lasted. "Give me a minute," Williard told the captain. He called Captain Harkness and Heavy, showed them the charts he had been working on then changed into his last pair of clean fatigues. Mama-san had just reappeared for work that day and was arm-deep in suds, trying to get their quarters and clothes back in shape. She had also brought him another bottle of root wine for some reason. It was still unopened.

He climbed into the back seat of the jeep and didn't say a word all the long ten miles from the tanker compound to brigade headquarters. His last desperate hope was that in the throes of all the combat and casualties of the Tet offensive Colonel Pinkerton might have forgotten the loss of his customized jeep, or at least been willing to forget and forgive, was gone. It was just wishful thinking anyway. The MPs were the reality. He wondered just how bad his punishment would be. It sure would be hard to go back to being a private again. He hoped that was all that would happen.

"Sgt Williard reporting as ordered," he said upon entering Colonel Pinkerton's office and coming to rigid attention. He grew even more rigid when he saw who else was there. General Ware, the division commander, was sitting beside the colonel, shuffling some papers in his lap. Damn, it must be worse than I thought. What else is he going to charge me with?

Colonel Pinkerton's half-bald head gleamed as if he had polished it instead of his boots and brass that morning. A thin



predatory smile hung on his ups, like a Texas sidewinder focusing in on a rabbit. “Sergeant, I ordered you here because--”

General Ware cleared his throat.

“Sir?”

“Perhaps I should go first, Colonel. Do you mind?”

“Oh. Yes, sir. I mean no, sir, I don’t mind at all.” Maybe the general had the goods on Williard, too. Pinkerton leaned back in his chair, the predatory smile growing larger. His eyes gleamed with anticipation.

General Ware got to his feet and approached Williard, still standing at attention. He didn’t say a word, but simply gripped the set of stripes on one of his sleeves and ripped them off. He grabbed the set on his other sleeve and ripped them off. too.

Ah, shit, Williard thought.

“At last!” Colonel Pinkerton thought.

“Sgt. James Williard, raise your right hand,” General Ware said.

Williard did so. Christ, is he going to rip off my sleeves as well?

“Repeat after me. I do swear....

“I do swear....” Now what?

“To uphold....”

“To uphold....”

One minute later, the oath was completed. General Ware felt in his pocket and pulled out two shiny first lieutenant’s bars. He pinned them on the lapels of Williard’s fatigue jacket. “Is that all right with you, Colonel Pinkerton? Given Mr.Williard’s experience. I thought we’d just skip the second lieutenant.”

“But, sir. Sir. But...” Colonel Pinkerton blubbered his confusion. Williard an officer?

“Yes, I know, it isn’t usual. Most combat commissions are for second lieutenant, but I have a little leeway, and I think this man deserves it. Don’t you agree?”



“Oh. Yes, sir. But, uh, my jeep. Impersonating an officer... ”
Pinkerton’s voice trailed off like the dying whine of a shut-down generator.

“Um, yes. I’ve been talking to Captain Duarez, one of the medical officers who, um, are in command of the dispensary. It came to my attention that perhaps a marine lieutenant by the same name was actually responsible for the disappearance of your jeep.”

“An officer was responsible? Surely you jest, sir.”

“Not at all. However, I’m sure there were mitigating factors involved. At any rate, the officer responsible has been sent home. Williard an officer? He is being awarded the Navy Cross, by the way, for breaking up the attack on the tanker battalion where Mister Williard also performed so admirably. I know you will forgive any little indiscretion in view of his wound and decoration.”

“But sir. Chu Lai. The club officer. Sir, I think--”

“Oh, yes, that club officer.” General Ware gazed up at the ceiling for a moment, trying to keep a lid on the laughter bubbling inside him like a can of pop that had just been shaken. “I understand that he has been sent to Japan for a medical evaluation. Something about seeing triplets all the time and talking out loud to himself, poor fellow. I doubt that we could trust any testimony from him, could we?”

“Uh, yes, sir. I mean no, sir, we couldn’t.” Colonel Pinkerton was slowly going into shock. If he had problems with Williard as a sergeant, who knew what might happen with him as an officer? He still couldn’t believe it.

The new lieutenant was slowly coming out of shock. Even though he was still at attention, he couldn’t help twisting his neck to look down at the shiny silver bars on each lapel of his fatigue jacket. Goddamn! Trust an old mustang general up from the ranks to know how to handle a stupid oil-wiping colonel.

General Ware spoke again. “Now, the problem is, where do we assign this new officer?” He rubbed his chin, as if the issue were in doubt.

“Well...” Pinkerton temporized. Oh God. Bad enough that the erstwhile Sgt. Williard was now a blameless officer, surely the general wouldn’t assign him to his own headquarters? Please, God!



“I have talked to both the marine and army commanding officers up at Chu Lai. There is a need of a medical liaison officer there to coordinate treatment of marine casualties. Besides, since the lieutenant’s brother has been sent home, the marines are sort of in shock at being Williard-less. I think that’s just the spot for him.”

“Oh, yes, sir!” Colonel Pinkerton agreed. Anything to get him away from brigade headquarters. “I think that’s a fine idea.” Then he happened to think: I bet it won’t be a week until he’s driving around in my very own jeep, and there’s not a damned thing I can do about it! Well, better that than have him in his own headquarters. If that ever happened, he decided he would just give up and resign his commission.

“Well, congratulations, Lieutenant,” General Ware said to Williard. He shook his hand. “I’m sure you’ll do a good job at Chu Lai.”

“I’ll try my best, sir.” Already, Lieutenant Williard was thinking of what sort of trade he might make to get control of that beautiful customized jeep, now residing at Chu Lai. It would be a fitting revenge.

Chapter Twenty

Lt. James Williard's red-canopied, customized jeep was getting to be well known around the Chu-Lai area. First, it had belonged to the marine squadron commander, then somehow it had come into possession of the new army lieutenant who had been assigned there. The marines didn't care. When they saw the jeep, whether on the flight line after a rocket attack, out on the perimeter with the line companies, back in the barracks and logistics areas or near the dispensaries, hospitals or dustoff landing pads, they knew their wounded were getting the best, quickest and most efficient care possible.

Williard had added a radio to its capabilities so that he could better co-ordinate the logistics of getting marine wounded to the appropriate treatment area as soon as possible. It was a bigger job than he had anticipated. The Viet Cong and NVA regularly rocketed the flight line, trying for the F-4's and cargo planes and helicopters.



There were constant clashes along the perimeter of the compound and with marine patrols, both trying to keep the enemy out of shooting distance. Rockets and eighty-one millimeter mortars blasted regularly at the pilots' quarters where the marines had set up an office for him in one of the Quonset huts.

Williard appreciated the little air-conditioned office and bunkroom right inside the entrance to the hut. It was a vast improvement over the tent he had lived in at Long Binh and the marine pilots seemed to enjoy having him around, even though he had little time to spend in the office. Whenever he was there, he could count on a pilot or two dropping by for a beer and asking how Jason was getting along back in the states where he was still on convalescent leave. Jason had become a marine legend and he was rapidly approaching that status himself. Newly assigned pilots were particularly prone to dropping by, wanting to hear about his and Jason's escapades straight from the horse's mouth. In what little off-duty time he had, the older pilots were always inviting him to the officer's club for a drink or three. They seemed to take comfort in his presence and treated him as one of their own, a rare distinction for an officer from one of the other services. He had never been so busy nor so content with a job.

Just now Williard was returning from a day-long round of discussions with the commanders of the various medical units stationed at Chu-Lai, tending to problems which had cropped up a couple of days ago when a coordinated attack in several areas had caused heavier than normal casualties. The CO's hadn't been inclined to argue with him, having learned from experience that debating with Lieutenant Williard about priorities inevitably brought the wrath of the marine wing commander down around their heads.

Williard thought the day had been productive, but he was tired and short on sleep. He glanced at his watch as he parked in front of the hooch. It was getting on toward evening and he was hoping to catch a few hours sleep before the almost inevitable nightly rocketing of the flight line. He went inside, opened the door to his office and breathed deeply of the cool air, like an Eskimo just returning home from the tropics. He popped a beer and sat down at his desk. The mail courier had come by in his absence and there was a stack of envelopes waiting. He picked them up and shuffled through them, sorting them out by priority. A return address caught his eye, standing out a like a vivid memory from his childhood. 309th Medical Dispensary. By God. Wonder who this is from? He thought. He split the envelope and pulled out several sheets of closely written script. *Heavy!* The letter was from Heavy! He began to read, lack of sleep forgotten.



...finally got my stripes sewed on. Thanks for the recommendation. The guys threw a jungle juice party for me, but without Dum-Dum it wasn't the same. Be damned! Heavy a staff sergeant now and in charge of the dispensary. I wonder how he's doing?

... the club is still closed. I guess it's a good thing, cause as short handed as we are, there ain't much time for drinking no way. We still haven't gotten in any replacements for Zapper, Dum-Dum and Blake. Heavy not drinking? Unbelievable!

... Junkman put in his retirement papers once his head got cleared up. He'll be leaving soon. Good for Junkman. I wonder what he'll do now?

... Duarez never came back. He got put to work at the hospital the night we got hit. He's still there, according to Major Burk, working his ass off. So much for Captain Duarez. Hard work is probably all he needed anyway.

... and speaking of Major Burk, when I talked to him the other day, he told me him and Angie had got married! When I called Angie to congratulate her, she said he's given up poker for blowjobs. I don't blame him! Williard laughed out loud. He wondered how long that marriage would last.

... Sandy and Toothless are helping me run sick call. Toothless is real happy now that he has something to do and I'm teaching Sandy to do some of the lab tests. He's... I wonder what the guys think of Heavy being in charge now? Sounds like they've accepted it. I always knew Heavy had the potential. He just needed a reason to get his head out of that blood cooler.

... was so nervous without a pistol to carry around that he re-enlisted and spent most of his bonus buying a replacement from a grunt at the hospital. Now that's a real Texan. Next thing you know he'll buy him a Stetson to wear instead of his fatigue cap.

... caught the clap again. He ought to settle down with one hooker or remember to take his pills one. No problem there. If I remember right, his tour is just about over. No, he'll probably volunteer for another year. Mop isn't going to change.

... funny thing happened a few weeks ago. Junie came back



and she brought a wounded Viet Cong in with her who wanted to surrender. She said his name was Nguyen and that he was hurting pretty bad and so since we was out of codeine and alcohol at the time, I offered him that bottle of root wine mama-san brought just before you left. He like to went crazy and started beating the ground and jabbering like a turkey gobbler. I asked Junie what was wrong but she said she didn't know. I guess he just don't like root wine or something. I don't blame him, Williard thought. Gahh!

... and Junie ain't staying in the officers hooch no more. Something about a water buffalo and a rabbit, if that makes any sense. It didn't make sense to Williard either, but then he remembered that Junie didn't speak very good English. Maybe Heavy was just misunderstanding her.

... and I hope your brother is doing OK. We oughta have some officers like him in the army. Heavy didn't know what he was wishing for. The marines might put up with someone like Jason, but he doubted if the army ever would.

... wouldn't believe Captain Harkness. He's doing good, seeing about half the patients and not hiding in his hooch all the time. He's leaving for Hawaii on R&R next week. He says he's got some things to teach Gertrude about sex, whoever that is. After Junie, Williard was sure he could. A night of combat makes a person appreciate what's waiting back home, if he's any example.

...get some replacements soon. If we do, I'm gonna take an afternoon off and go see how the sisters are getting along. I ain't finished with that pig yet! I hope he doesn't run into that big Green Beret again while he's there, Williard thought. He might not get off so lucky next time.

... bit of bad news I heard from Murphy, the chaplain's assistant. You remember Ky, your little friend at the orphanage? He ran off, but before he went, he used the money Murphy said you give him and hired a big old mean grunt just in from the field to beat up the chaplain. He's still in the hospital. Angie told me he has to lay on his stomach because he's bleeding from the ass. It makes me wonder what else that grunt did besides pounding him into the ground. You don't have to worry about the rest of the kids, though. Murphy is keeping the orphanage open. I even kicked in a few P's myself and sent the rest of the soap over there. Sorry I had to pass this on, but I knew you'd want to know, seeing as how the chaplain was a friend of yours. Williard couldn't have planned it better himself. That had been the one bit of unfinished business he had left behind and it had been bothering him.



... colonel ain't been bothering nobody much lately. He about went bonkers when so many vehicles got tore up while all the fighting was going on and now he's so busy customizing him another jeep he don't have time to do much inspecting. Just wait, Williard thought. His kind never changes. Before you know it, he'll be carrying that oil-rag around in his holster again. Well, that was Heavy's worry now.

Williard put the letter down and leaned back in his chair, thinking how much a crisis could change a person if the potential was there to begin with. He knew that he had changed and the dispensary medics certainly had, too. It was just too bad that crisis didn't seem to affect politicians much. They were worse than ever after the Tet offensive. He doubted now that they would ever unleash the military enough to win this crazy war, and in the meantime, the fighting went on and on. Well, there wasn't much he could do about that. He just hoped that it didn't wind up destroying the army now that he had a career again.

Inside the Quonset hut, Williard didn't hear the whistle of the incoming rounds but the familiar crash and rumble of rockets exploding on the flight line interrupted his thoughts. He sat upright, listening as the explosions came nearer. The phone rang.

"Lt. Williard. Medical liaison."

"Casualties, sir, on the flight line, and we got problems with the clearing company. It's getting hit, too."

"On my way," Williard said. The clearing company was one of the medical units he was responsible for. He grabbed his flak jacket and shucked it on as he ran out of his office. He hurried out into the night, ready to help fight the war as best as he knew how.



Darrell Bain

Darrell is the author of more than a dozen books in many genres, running the gamut from humor to mystery and science fiction to non-fiction and a few humorous works which are sort of fictional non-fiction, if that makes any sense. He has even written for children. For the last several years he has concentrated on humor, both short fiction, non-fiction (sort of) and novels.

He is in the process of writing the fourth novel in the humor/adventure

series begun with Medics Wild. Darrell served 13 years in the military and his two stints in Vietnam formed the basis for his first published novel, Medics Wild. Darrell has been writing off and on all his life but really got serious about it only after the advent of computers. He purchased his first one in 1989 and has been writing furiously ever since.

While Darrell was working as a lab manager at a hospital in Texas, he met his wife Betty. He trapped her under a mistletoe sprig and they were married a year later. Darrell and Betty now own and operate a Christmas tree farm in East Texas which has become the subject and backdrop for many of his humorous stories and books.



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