

THAT SPLENDID LITTLE WAR

Helicopters swarmed like flies over heaps of offal on jade mountains, as shrieking jets darted through swirling plumes of fire in search of further sacrifice. Several curved from arcs of destruction to dive at us, their thunder shaking the very ocean we floated on. Not far off, patrol boats bristling with cannons surged menacingly our way, as if we were some new source of irritation upon which to vent their rage. My goodness, I cried out loud, weren't these characters expecting us? Without warning, we were suddenly caught up in utter chaos...broken into some live newsreel footage replete with static, focus problems, and stuttering imagery.

My first impressions of that torn and tormented country were to last forever, mingling immediate sensations like the call to a bowel movement with an urgency to escape some omniscient, yet unknown, danger. It washed over me in an invisible coating which I wore the next two years, and wonder will ever come off. Crouched on the wheelhouse, wishing I'd filled some sand bags in Guam, I swept with my binoculars a majestic panorama of crystal-white beaches, classic surf spots, and emerald-green forests...backdrop to a phalanx of mechanized birds of prey, which fluttered in formations of overkill 'til nothing was left alive.

My obese Captain barked obscenities into the microphone, sweating like a pig and spinning dials on our radios in panic, while the mate frantically waved an American flag from the foredeck...their burlesque Mutt and Jeff routine sole humor in the trauma we'd stumbled upon. I couldn't tear my eyes from the destruction on the hillside, reeling to see a curtain of fire suck away all life, as my first napalm strike registered a fully new dimension to the horrors innate in mans' propensity to kill.

The frenzy on land, sea, and air was appalling, with every conceivable machination of death taking part in finishing whatever they'd started...the primal reason we were here: "to kill the commie bastards," now perfectly clear after my months in a sentient embrace of nature. I actually moaned out loud with the full impact of America's power before me. This was gonna be the nastiest sideshow I'd ever attend, without even paying to get in, and I glanced full 'round for an exit my first few minutes "in country."

Whether luck 'o the Irish or sheer power of will on my part, the Nez Perce sailed toward us, churning between swamped sampans like Little Toot chanting, "I think I can, I think I can!" I was leaping up and down one moment and over the side the next, stroking away from that sea-going dungeon with all my might as fisherman laughed at the spectacle from

shallow craft around me, their glinting gold teeth marking my channel to freedom.

Black Jack almost fell off the poopdeck as I clambered over the stern. Dripping wet, I begged to join him, promising most anything, while he roared and hooted 'til tears poured down his wrinkling smile. I knew I was OK then, and caught the beer he threw, scampering to starboard at his signal while he shouted back and forth with Captain Blob in barter for my soul. I heard some final snarls from that sorry specimen, the thump of my footlocker as it was tossed aboard, and then they were gone, wraiths in a terminal nightmare.

The sun warmed me as I watched, unphased, while Cobra gunships poured rockets into the last huts on the hill. My great anxiety began to pass and, beer in hand, I leaned against a familiar bulkhead where a bull walrus had me pissing on my feet once upon a dream. Knowing I'd reached home base, it seemed I could survive most anything now, and felt unmoved by the savagery still swirling around me. There was something so powerful about Jack's aura it seemed the boat itself was encased in some kinda impenetrable bubble of security. I noticed I was breathing again, as well.

We began to trade recent history, Jack with his arm around me like a longlost father, his handlebar mustache twitching like peculiar antennae and eyes aglow with that radiating humor which had warmed even frozen North Sea nights. "One helluva war!" he kept shouting, slapping his leg and roaring at varied witnesses to our reunion. "Right here on the French Riviera!" he was shouting, when up from the engine room trundled old Henry Dobbs, still performing the maritime miracles that kept Jack one step out of Davey Jone's Locker. They introduced Tom, the First Mate, and instantly I knew our foursome was a match for anything this place could throw at us.

We were together, agonies of separate crossings gone, and an ordination dawning on each of us. We were chosen members of a secular congregation gathered on challenging shores for some great purpose! At that we anchored off a Buddhist temple in a protected cove to work our way into another Everclear reality, in preparation for the sorriest conflagration our nation ever wreaked upon itself, its youth, and a poor agrarian people.

Like so many of my generation, I landed on those fear-filled shores a bankrupt pilgrim, love-lost and value-shorn, a gob of shapeless clay to be molded by the first hands to reach me. Luckier than most immigrant young consigned to that cankered purgatory, somehow, by God's grace or Force of Destiny, the shattered pieces of your broken storyteller were picked up by the "floating family of man" and spirited away in the nick of time so this tale might be told.

Jack and I rowed off in the skiff to reminisce on our earlier daze and update each other on the years between. He

nodded in commiseration at Kela's changing of the tide, twinkled to my version of LSD's deliverance, and laughed all the way back to the Nez how we were gonna, "turn this war around!" I was clear in no time, ready to follow him anywhere, revitalized and whole as if under the spell of some powerful shaman. It was just the curtain of fear he'd raised momentarily more than any lasting change. Reality still sprawled in the same grotesque dimensions it had only hours ago, but now I felt I could deal with it! Amazed more than anything with my attitude, I went straight through the galley to my old bunk, and there found my signature carved in the Bering Straits when I'd known somehow I'd be on board her again.

Besides having Jack as mentor, I was also more prepared to deal with Asia than young troopers marching off transports, as I'd been here before. The vista was familiar and these little people looked like those I'd encountered on my trip from Singapore going West. This turned out to be very wrong...there are no people like the Vietnamese. At first I suspected the French influence for their anti-social nature, but slowly the fact they'd been at war forever registered.

There's patently no parallel to judge them by...their value of life is unique unto themselves. Young people I met had never known anything else...the smell of burning bodies and "take what you can and run," simply their heritage. It took some time to adjust and hasn't worn off yet. Every time I'm near a Vietnamese, that chary sensation comes over me. Hallmarks of society were apparent: fine restaurants, good dope and wine, and pretty women...but it was all steeped in deep-rooted currents of untenable hatred, beyond my ability to decipher or avoid. It hit me early, with my first bullet, and never went away...so solly, Cholly.

Nha Trang was a bustling R and R port, a Rest and Recuperation stop for the troops, and our first job as harbor tug gave us time to explore the prevailing ambience of international attitudes in a sort of neutral zone before going north on a real mission. Tom and I roamed the beach bars, central marketplace, and shantytown whorehouses aloof and detached...more like nonchalant tourists than mercenaries embroiled in a bitter conflict lacking clarity of participants and goals alike. Here was a unique oasis in the middle of a war without boundaries, where journalists, spies, and the varied combatants rubbed elbows off the clock sharing wine, women, and song in a macabre joi de vivre only manhunts and mayhem can create. It struck me as preposterous, but slowly I realized there were no rules anymore...and might never be again.

Jack had a beach villa, a live-in woman, and a mutual admiration society gathered 'round him...soldiers of fortune from all factions, stranger than I knew could exist. Top Army brass delivered filet mignon, mercenary killers from

Korea brought liquor bottles with ceremonial worms, and CIA spooks chatted amicably with French planters, while some of the sexiest women on earth slithered between them all. My job consisted of multiple tasks: majordomo, go-fer, and rumor monger. I'd keep track of several conversations at once and filed a log of commodity sources from our varied guest list. It was tough work, but Jack probably knew more about the war than the Pentagon and Hanoi put together. Westmoreland, himself, even came by for a drink now and then. Jack's been a fuckin' magnet for vital forces from the edge all his life, this much I'm sure of.

Tom and I had no use for army-issue food and began exploring village markets for brown rice, fish, and vegetables. Somewhere in our pursuits, a jovial street urchin befriended us, helping with the shopping, and demonstrating how we could catch fish off the stern of the boat by keeping her in gear to stir up a feeding frenzy in the prop wash. Twelve-year-old Lu Duc turned out to be a great cook, and we adopted him outright. He became my kid brother, interpreter, and safeguard through a lot of the confusion we'd encounter.

Barefoot in surf shorts and aloha shirts, Lu Duc and I crossed all lines of demarcation, shopping in Cong-held territory, visiting his cadre sympathizing relatives, and sharing a view of Asian ways far beyond the belicose attitude of most around us. Lu translated while his grandfather told me of the French struggle to contain his peoples' fierce independence. Tending an American shrapnel wound on his VC brother's back, I caught a sense of manifest destiny for the North and South in this endemic civil conflict, and it clued me early to maintain neutrality. It seemed our colonialist role would only replace the French in a thankless and tenuous task where we backed our side against the other--when they were gonna be one sooner or later regardless. Mind you, this was late 1965 and far from opinions in Time, Newsweek, or at McNamara & Company.

It was very confusing to hear it from the different sides. The only one I could follow was Jack and he told 'em all the same thing, "One helluva war!" He was learning all he could about the Viet Cong, or "Charley," as our people called the enemy, and when he found our gook opponents liked Salem cigarettes, we stole pallets of them and beer, as well, 'til there was nary a crevice on the Nez unfilled. It's good we did, as no one else watched out for us!

Our indoctrination was faring well. Tutored candidly in its ways, and loaded with trinkets to parlay with, we sailed into the Indochina fracas one fine morning, wide-eyed believers in the businesslike nature of man, prepared for any sort of deals, and willing to play at all the odds. As we headed to the front lines with Jack singing pirate songs at the wheel, Lu Duc and I let out our fishing lines, mama san hung laundry on the fantail, and Henry and Tom sprawled on

the party deck in beach chairs, watching some of the fairest coastline in any ocean slip by in a warm morning breeze.

The horrors inherent there were never more than a blink away, but our family balanced delicately in another dimension, liason to survival, compromise, and a certain self-composed indifference. Every possible thing exists, of course, so it wasn't long before some poorly informed bozo tried poking through the thin veil of our separation. Holes in my young body were more his intent! Moreso, this moron disturbed the serenity of our voyage, my virginous viewpoint, and our euphoric beginnings!

We'd trolled for hours, and as evening approached without a hook-up, I talked Jack into some grenade fishing close to shore where a shallow reef promised dinner. Although I tried this later in Hawaii, it's best done in a warzone relevant to local sentiment. It's quite efficient: you lower a bucket of food, they start feeding, then you drop the grenade. It's that simple, if no one's offended.

I was sitting on deck, fins and mask on, waiting for the bubbles to clear, when I heard this loud whack right between my legs. Chunks of paint chirupped by, cutting my face, and a ricochet's whine rang in my ear! A smoky report issued from the beach where, sure enough, the first in a long line of turkeys to fire on me crouched in the sand dunes near a small tree trying to compensate for distance. I couldn't believe it...someone was trying to kill me! Couldn't he tell we were simple traders come in peace?

Hopping on our fifty-caliber bolted between the deck chairs, I proceeded to get a batch of skin burned off my bare legs, hot machine-gun shells searing me as I strafed the dunes, cutting down his tree in a response I'd neither rehearsed nor placed moral value on before that moment. As we cruised up the coast, I sat there catching my breath, trying to see if I'd killed him, and wondering more if I'd really wanted to, while I shook all over in a combination of rage and surprise at my actions. I was furious that someone had consciously tried to take my life, at the same time recognizing some eye-for-an-eye immediacy to impersonal attacks, which condoned murder and extreme predjudice for each of us, whenever called upon.

No one else seemed affected...laughing more at the damage I'd done to myself and the boat. When Jack pulled onto the beach a mile ahead to pile cigarettes and beer in a gesture of peace, I actually felt guilty for my rude behavior! What an upside-down place this was! The incident passed, but ruined my day and left me confused for quite a few more. In quick calls, I guessed we were on our own, but knew better than question my Captain's wisdom.

As we continued along the tropical shoreline, halfway up that snake-like country, we left those solicitous marks of our passing in many spots, hoping the varied cast of characters would come to recognize the little tug with the red Indian

head on its stack as a friend of all and foe to none. It seemed to work, for in that first year everyone else got the shit shot out of 'em while we puttered about like kids at a carnival. Of course, that's B. M. which is basically "Before Mekong," with its free-fire zone starting at the delta where everyone killed everyone, without exception, in keeping with some long-standing tradition, I supposed.

Vietnam was really a queer place. Sometimes nothing happened for months, others so much it blurred one's vision. We arrived at an immense, isolated beach and were just anchoring up when suddenly an Army Jeep came bouncing out of nowhere. An ambulance had fallen off a bridge into a buffalo wallow with six wounded aboard, and they desperately needed a diver! We threw our aqua lungs aboard and hung to the machine gun turret on a perilous, overland race against time. I knew their people were dead because I ran out of breath on the ride, but we tried to help anyway.

The mud hole was a sorry mess, as they'd shot all the buffalo to keep them from stirring it up, and now what water there was had coagulated to a creamy, crimson ooze. Jack and I geared up in seconds and slid into the gore of slimy, red death. It was quicksand. The deeper I went, the more I became a blind tadpole. Edging along the bottom like a crab scuttling silent seas, I bumped into a big red cross on the side of their ambulance. Reaching through the window my hand touched a clammy, kinky-haired head. These guys were definitely dead. Fumbling with the door latch I tried to get it open and keep my composure in that gory hell hole.

An arm moved! It grabbed me and started jerking me into the cadaver-filled hearse! My mouth filled with mud and blood as I struggled in a fearsome grip, pulling the torso to within inches of my startled eyes...whereupon I discovered Jack, wrinkles and all, grinning from his mask, with the sound of his hooting and howling broken into fragments and gooey bubbles of blood! What an asshole! He'd crawled in the other side to wait with the dead. I told you he had a wry sense of humor.

It wasn't long after we had all six blue corpses stacked neatly that a sniper's bullet had us digging furiously for cover. These zeroes kept us pinned down all night, even trying to break our perimeter about three in the morning, at which point our boys let loose a fusillade so violent and all consuming no doubt everything within a mile had a hole in it. We were never frugal with firepower in response, but the cordite cloud settling into the mud hole nearly suffocated us and we had a hard time breathing for about an hour. I got a headache.

What a world! I ate everybody's canned peaches while bullets dinked and whirred nearby. Jack shouted "One helluva war!" loudly into the void, drinking all their beer by himself. At first light, the dead were beginning to bloat, and a queezy hissing harmonized from the damp nostrils of the

massacred buffaloes. Their owners, who'd been witness to this inane slaughter that probably set them back ten years, whimpered quietly in their cozy ring of razor wire. I would've shared my peaches with them but figured it'd only make matters worse.

A radio muffled in warning, "Keep your people down," and then the whole tree line near the bridge vaporized in a fire storm that sucked all the air from our wallow, whipping the C-ration trash away, and tidying our outpost for morning inspection. Far from a joke, moments later a Special Forces Major appeared, painted in camo like a ghoul. Kicking down their mini stockade, he began beating the farmers with his rifle butt, screaming about the "fuckin' cowardly prick who'd killed his driver." Whoa, it looked like he was about to shoot 'em all, but he just emptied a clip into their midst and told 'em to get the fuck outta his sight! He thanked me and Jack and offered us a ride back to the boat as if nothing had happened at all. It was just one of those days in the 'Nam. There it is...

After our disturbing welcome at the mud hole, we goofed around on the beach for a week, fishing off the stern, listening to our stereo, and drinking beer. Something was brewing around us but we weren't in on it yet. Grey bereted recon men would swim to the boat at dark, weapons wrapped in their clothes, to hang out with us and tell tall tales. They were invariably lean, mean, and from Tennessee where "their pappy had taught 'em to shoot rabbits in the eye when they were knee-high to a grasshopper." They worked alone, dropped from choppers to creep in the bush for a week with only a cyanide cap and a forty-five for comfort. I met some of the most unusual people on earth at that remote, twenty-mile beach...and not one of them knew why any of us were there.

Whatever it was, we all began to agree it was gonna be a big one. SEAL teams came and went on unexplained missions. There was talk of intricate tunnels full of North Vietnamese Army trucks and vast, underground hospitals hidden in the back of the valley known as the "concrete jungle." The top one-percent of the war mongers' dream, these sea, air, and land commandos were the real professionals in our killing machine. Jack plyed every wily towboat trick he knew to weasel some reason outta them. We had whatever they wanted: drugs, alcohol, music, and good food. His woman would give 'em head or the whole works, as long as they provided information while he worked out a military stratagem for Tuy Hoa's vast, isolated valley.

His agitation increased as more bizarre killers began to convene at our previously desolate outpost. Surrounded by guys who made Rambo look like a Park Ranger, I learned the ways of war. My second impression of Vietnam was colored by these creatures from another dimension, and many a long night I held my breath as they recounted moments of mayhem, death, and glory from "out there" where they worked. Jack

tried early to curb my enthusiasm for our newfound friends, but it was as futile as my mom's ban on rocketry. They were simply the most real people I'd ever met, in a time and place where an altered code of ethics was the key ingredient to staying alive. I was befriended by a Navy Captain from an Underwater Demolition Team and we played with explosives like kids with firecrackers, using C-4 plastique and det cord to clear a few coral heads and improve fishing behind the boat.

Lu and I exchanged techniques as the little tug idled against the beach, stirring up the sand. Catching far more than we could use, we became seafood merchants. Daily we'd jump ashore, trekking overland through rice paddies to villages, where we'd sell our surplus, gather supplies, and trade for hard-to-get items. We were the quintessential product of the entire conflict, tripping along barefoot with our strings of fish to rendezvous with Korean Marines, Viet Cong, and NVA regulars alike, trading for an odd array of necessities ranging from rice to AK ammo.

Strange, though, we did no business with Americans, for it seemed when we were near them, a suspicious distrust warped our otherwise warm encounters. After about a month of traipsing the maze of dikes on our varied rounds we were welcome everywhere, as if our curious camaraderie represented some freshening view of America's presence, or something even deeper which all men hope for. It was actually a hideous lie, and I think we all knew it.

This seemed an idyllic existence at a hundred bucks a day and I marvelled at how well things had worked out for me when such extensive suffering seemed the common lot. I smiled as a crowd of young VC gathered to buy our catch, thinking how neat it was to be the only American over here peddling fish to the enemy. There was no secret to their loyalty once they trusted me...playing cards in a cardboard hootch, ChiCom machine guns leaned at the ready.

We were very open and so were they, our "live and let live" thinking appropriate to survival. Lu told me that they wondered about my bare feet, long hair, and life in Hawaii. When it came to the boat and our objectives we had no more idea than they. We were just fishing, silly as it seemed. Their laughs were hearty but tinged with an anxiety. I think they guessed we were the prelude to an act upcoming, and they were real close on that score.

Days turned to weeks of waiting. While Lu and I ran our profitable incursion into the local food chain, Jack and his lady lounged on deck as if this were the Riviera, drinking Vodka tonics and awaiting evening's advent of mad dogs returning from the bush. Henry and Tom read and tinkered at nautical projects until nightfall, when like clockwork the Nez turned into the hottest nightclub within a hundred miles. It was simply unbelievable. In character diversification we rivaled any U.N. cocktail party.

Extraordinary Eurasian prostitutes appeared from thin air to mingle with crazed American killers, while ROK Marines arm-wrestled ARVN paratroopers from Saigon, and a few grinning VC from the card game winked in recognition. I began to sense the nature of the conflict. We had a splendid nine-to-five war going, and everyone was having a fine time, at least where we were.

Tom had been one of Timothy Leary's buddies in the early days of the acid pioneers at Cuernavaca, Mexico, and we had Jack primed for his first LSD trip. One exceptional morning, the three of us set across the glittering beach to trip out, do some body surfing, and bridge the generation gap. He only wanted half a hit so we had a mild day of exploration, laughing 'til we couldn't stand about our mandate to hold this beach at all cost. Grabbing handfuls of sand, we held the beach, giggling like little boys while silently around us the real players in this life-and-death delirium ran down the clock to one of the most awesome spectacles of annihilation unleashed in all history.

Jack was getting bored and more irritated with Saigon, as day by endless day he tried to figure what we were doing unprotected in the middle of enemy territory. The SEAL Unit taking depth readings around the river made him think a huge harbor might be dredged back of the village, but months of idle gossip produced no real pieces in the puzzle. We explored North thirty miles, distributing peace offerings at appropriate locations, finding only more beautiful beaches, fishing spots, and a couple of good surf breaks. I considered locating a board, but it was gonna take a lotta fish in a place like this.

A few days later we cruised South to Cape Vung Ro, and after putting ashore a sizable stash of Budweiser and Salems, we anchored in its panoramic bay for the night. Shortly after dark, amidst laughing from the beach, Lu said they were thanking us and inviting us ashore. I guessed everyone knew we posed no threat by now. On the contrary, we were about the most curious presence in the whole screwy country.

The immediate shock wore off quickly, so Jack and I set out with Lu to meet the boys in black. Jack loaded a case of assorted whiskey into the skiff and I took a handful of LSD, chuckling about the chance for world peace I'd stumbled upon. There on that silvery beach in the moonglow, we met the enemy and shared a moment on the border of truth and understanding, for whatever it was worth. I told you this was gonna be a better story than any dope dealer wandering around Haight-Ashbury or the communes of the sixties.

I was at another severe frontier balanced, on its very fulcrum--delicately at that--but probably exactly where I was supposed to be. I can't imagine anyone being in a better position for such an occasion as "turning on" Charley...not a war correspondent, a freelance photographer, and certainly no military sorts! This was a perfect mix of me and a whacko

Captain like Jack, our predisposing gifts to gain trust, and greater forces than we knew that booked our appointments with destiny.

The older ones drank with Jack, while six my age and two about Lu's listened to him translate my enthusiastic diatribe on this miraculous medicine I'd brought from America to end the war, while I beamed a confidence born in hopes of the free world, and other genuine vagaries. Finally convinced, if nothing else by my companionship with Lu, we dropped acid together...and weapons laid aside waited on that exquisite beach for the vision of oneness I'd promised would be their reward.

It was hardly what they got in the long run, but I refuse all blame for that! Like other incidents in that era, it was just a precious moment made for us, ambassadors from separate societies and generations. Our tiny comity of nations lay in a circle on the beach, heads touching like spokes of a wheel under those starry heavens, snickering and giggling at the mystery of life and joke that must be death.

Of course it was real, far too much so...and thirty hours later in a blood-red sunrise we wiped them off the face of the earth. Only their questions remain now, and my memory of our friendship. We were just some kids on a beach caught in a maelstrom not of our making and far too fearsome for us to figure out or hide from. They wondered how long we'd stay, and I guessed forever because America never lost. More than words I remember simple grins suspended in hopeful visions. In their view, nothing they had was ours to win...which meant they had nothing to lose.

So we killed 'em all, terminated them with extreme prejudice, proper jargon, in what was undoubtedly the most viciously efficient assault in the annals of war. I've never found a single printed word about the Rape of Tuy Hoa, nor a soul who'll admit it's even there. Screaming off the ocean with the first rays of dawn, hundreds of jets sloshed napalm's fury, whipping the valley at once into an inferno. Everything was ablaze...even the sand was on fire while men flailed flaming wings like angels in Hell. The village at the river mouth melted in great fireballs, and I watched livestock run "lit up" in some fiery rodeo past the hootch where we'd made our deals.

The smell of victory, that cloyed mix of burning flesh and kerosene, filled the air as our radios crackled with changing coordinates, and a terrifying whine of gigantic artillery shells sliced the atmosphere. Jack was spinning dials on all three radios and pointing out to sea, and then we were wound up to the red lines on all five Gimmy's toward the source of those huge projectiles, which one could actually see arcing overhead leaving squirrelly trails in the early morning sky.

Only Jack and Henry were old enough to know what creation of man could be causing this terror beyond all

others. "We'll see 'em soon enough, kiddo," and he pushed the Nez up another notch. "They're just over the horizon, and after this you can tell your grandkids you was in a real war...them's fuckin' Battleship's out there or I'm Charley the Gook! Goddam military assholes! Somethin's goin' on here way bigger than I thought!" Great flashes and tremendous shock waves bowled over us long before we actually saw them.

I could not even fathom the armada we came upon! A fully escorted fleet of battleships and heavy cruisers rocked back spewing salvo after flameshot salvo of one-ton, sixteen-inch shells left from World War Two and sent over from San Diego by Tricky Dick for the festivities. The almighty flotilla belched soot and fire far across the tranquil waters...where fifteen miles away the firepower they issued forth moved mountains, buried underground hospitals, and pulverized an entire environment, leaving not a tree nor blade of grass intact.

There was an arm's-length insulation to our view, and we couldn't see the actual destruction, like the napalming of the villages. Out here in the middle of the ocean, the tremendous charges that hurtled the projectiles, although deafening, were more than likely a small percentage of the force let loose upon their landing. The shockwaves from the battlegroup were beginning to hurt my eyes, and I sought refuge. It was too much to comprehend or even watch. I curled in my bunk, wishing to return to my youth, wondering how I ever got to this place, and what we were killing the villagers for. The roar was shattering my thoughts, so I took some coffee to the wheelhouse. Being near Jack made some of it go away.

We didn't even get close before a destroyer, two jets, and a swarm of Cobras screamed at us in challenge. With Tom standing rigid on the wheelhouse with a large American flag, Jack spun dials while my asshole puckered up tighter than a drum skin over a campfire. An older man's voice came back in reassuring tones as my captain screamed, "Don't you dare threaten me! I've been holding this fuckin' beach alone for forty-five goddam days and someone better start telling me why or I'll scuttle my rig and go home, over!"

Whoa! We were pretty insignificant in the whole picture to be talking like this, but the Commander was actually cordial, if not amused by our presence, suggesting we "keep to port and out of the line of fire as some of the old shells didn't pack the oompf they used to." He figured we knew about the giant airport going in here and was aware of our presence, informing Jack that seven Liberty Ships were eleven miles off his attack group, standing by for unloading. He was even apologetic about the fifty-day delay, had no qualms about us watching, and called off his maliciously circling guard dogs...whereupon we settled into our deck chairs for an assault unparalleled since the invasion of Normandy.

I wondered why we were so far offshore but guessed that's how those big rigs operate. We could barely see the coast. On the outer edge a nuclear-powered carrier watched over the thirty or so ships. Jack hooked up with its Captain and they chatted nonchalantly, as if this was some social event, chuckling discreetly about how many napalm loaded jets the carrier had let loose in the darkness. He carried on with different officers. "How impressive it was to see these magnificent old dreadnoughts in what was probably their last engagement. Not much of an enemy...but beautiful rigs, excellent fire control systems, all still working perfectly," and a lot more of that kind of patting on the back.

Jack really had a way about him! Consider it! Surely no one else in the world would charge, in challenge almost, directly into something the likes of this and then carry on with its leaders as if he was an old, personal friend. It was extraordinary...but I think they, more than we, appreciated that someone actually witnessed their majestic coming and going in all its finery, precision, and fury. It was over in six hours, and they were gone.

Jack figured they fired more than five-thousand rounds. After pensively glaring out the window, my captain suddenly shouted into his microphone to the whole fleet, "Cry havoc and let slip the dogs of war!" That made him feel better and he looked at me and muttered, "That fuckin' Nixon musta snuck some Shakespeare into his Bible studies back in Whittier." I nodded but had no idea what he meant. "He's not as dumb as he looks! This was a goddamn freebie, a million pounds of surplus. What a son of a bitch!" He was still really pissed they'd never told him what we were doing here. Now informed, as well as having let off some steam with the Naval Chiefs, we were ready for our part in its sinister architecture.

Far from over, what happened inshore next may've been worse simply by our being near, for out of the sky descended the 101st Airborne Division, swarms from hell. Three-hundred helicopters filed in, stirring up sand for miles, marking the slaughter of the innocents to which we were both candid participants and passive partners. Rotors thundering and engines wailing, lethal horsemen of the apocalypse pursued anything left alive, pouring streams of tracers into the last nooks and crannies of that charnel house of death. Like predatory insects, the Screaming Eagles engaged all living things, even animals fleeing cratered rice paddies. I watched in mingled curiosity and fearsome loathing as gunships tracked down the last water buffalo, cow, and pig 'till they were down to only chickens and ducks at a carnival gallery.

I crouched in my newly sand-bagged bunker on the wheelhouse with binoculars as I'd done at first sight of this demented place, wondering whether to shit, shout, or cry. I was held insensate by the monstrosity of it all, as

men swelled up like marshmallows and melted into Rorschach inkblots on a hoary landscape. Gunships flickered crimson waves of saturation strafing, sweeping their way from the seashore to the waterfalls ten miles inland, putting a bullet in every square yard.

Finally the one-on-one assassins disgorged and proceeded to spread out across the valley in a fusillade of final kill. This had to be a nightmare! Never had carnage been so total, complete, and perfectly planned out! Not a living thing spared, not even the ducks and chickens in the end. It was over before the sun set, a day in my life that will never fully pass.

We sat together on the party deck, our family watching as flickering fires spewed coils of sparks into a wounded blood-red sky. The only living witnesses to an earth-shattering event which changed us all forever, we were silent in the aftermath of its passing fury, unable to speak or look into each other's eyes. All was quiet then. Each of us was wrapped in his own wistful and moot comprehension, insulated from the savagery which had swept the world around us by the simple truth that we were the last to know...that I didn't know in my promises of oneness to our young friends. May they rest with that much to believe in.

The long night passed in the smell of death, which lingered for weeks. There's little percentage in going over it. We acknowledged the impact and helped each other as best we could, especially Lu, who could now only stare quietly from his tiny cubicle in the galley. "Did the spirits of the boys we'd dreamed with make it to Heaven?" I couldn't honestly answer, but it was certain we wouldn't meet them again. I cried with him, peeling potatoes, and remembered Macky trying to bring me back from my darkness. Lu looked on that once-beautiful valley and saw something else...what it meant to him I'll never know.

Jack muttered for days to himself, graven now in face and attitude. "The bastard's shoulda' let us know," Old Henry buried himself deeper in cheap novels. Tom never said a word, as if he knew better than ^{to} try, and I was stunned for a long time with an ache in my heart. None of us should've been there in the first place was what I really felt, but who could I tell?

Seven rusting Liberty Ships from Oakland anchored outside us next morning, and the VHF crackled, "Tugboat ashore, proceed to literage." So we did. Tying along the lead ship's gangway, we found our supplies routed via Subic Bay in the Philippines, among them several large boxes marked with my name. I was surprised to find more than a hundred letters from Kela dating back to the sorry beginnings so long ago. Jack slammed his fist against a bulkhead, cursing my late master for withholding my mail, and promising retribution! Simply bewildered by it all...so much change having overcome me since then I'd actually closed those doors

in my mind. I hesitated opening them again. Merely sorting them by date at the back of my bunk like fated marks of passage, I went on with the job at hand.

We were swamped anyway...it was twenty-four hours straight for a hundred days spotting barges to shore for the Army Corps of Engineers and a bunch of Seabees. They bulldozed huge ramps on the beach and all we had to do was ram the barges back and forth as they disgorged neatly numbered pieces of some intricately laid out puzzle. Jack and Tom needed rest and I got to run the boat, reading letter after letter, the Nez at full tilt, while slowly her tale unfolded...better late, I guessed, than never.

Perhaps the subtle period of my conversion, so full of catastrophe and trauma, insulated me from the outside entirely...but now to tear through her heart-rending anguish drew up sensitivities patently unfitting my present circumstance. I simply couldn't open myself to all this. I tried to hear her reasons for sleeping with a trusted friend, as if extenuating circumstances induced by our powerful drugs could alter an old formula of fidelity held deep in my conscience.

No way! In quick conclusion, if such were the case, our group was in a hell of a mess, using excuses like "not knowing who we were" when in the very altered states we professed were steps to enlightenment! It just didn't fly with me, no matter how she cut it. As I steered my way through an uncaring world, my features tightened to keep submerged the creature within she was trying to reach. Her letters sloshed in the wheelwash as I steered my course without looking back.

The scope of carnage we'd seen was almost equaled by the creation that followed. A space-age runway stretched across the flattened miles of sand, complete with concrete bunkers and underground communication networks, living quarters, and all the conveniences of home. The secret Air Force Base rose from charred earth like some Phoenix out of ashes, enabling the strike force of B-52's from Guam to land in 'Nam itself, cutting eight-thousand miles off their sorties, but totally illegal, as we'd never declared war. Maybe we were gonna exercise that option next, for all I knew, but this was no SATS or tactical support airfield like the Marines had at Chu Lai, which only took twenty-seven days to build with its steam catapult and arresting cables to throw and catch planes. What we'd put in here was a real monster...almost an alien presence on the land.

Then the trailer camp, Texan construction crews who'd put its pre-fab extravaganza together, ships and all...just up and disappeared without a trace. We were left alone once more to fish in peace, while shimmering heat waves danced dervishes upon that omniscient mirage. Tricky Dick sat smirking by his Christmas tree, Jane Fonda pussyfooted through Hanoi's hospitals, and fat brass wunderkind chuckled

down cold Pentagon hallways, while this arcane ace up their sleeve lay in stillborn splendor, awaiting its call. Air Force Chief of Staff Curtis Lemay had plans to "bomb these little bastards back into the Stone Age" and Tuy Hoa had its place, I'm sure. We just couldn't follow it from where we were 'cause our subscription to Time Magazine had run out. Peace was not quite at hand though, nor was honor...

I've tried to describe the view that Lu and I saw so vividly as an example of what it might mean to America's four-million young men sent to that horror show with their twelve-month, bargain-priced, ringside seats. The sheer drama of this particular event in its singularly compact format, utterly improbable power, and inevitable purposelessness seems representative of what they each got for their quarter's worth. A plane never landed there. The entire mess, including what happened in Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos was orchestrated with this same overkill thinking.

For me and my Vietnamese kid brother, just looking at the smoldering holocaust before us was enough. Even the ocean lost its warmth and humor. Blackened sand no longer invited us to play, and basic color was stripped from our world. Burnt, basaltic bones of once-green mountains stood silent witness to yellow earth movers flattening alluvial plains. Trickling waterfalls cried warm tears down still-hot cliffs. Its sheer preposterousness overcame me and I preferred not to watch, but Lu and I saw migratory birds circle looking for missing marshes of the once-pristine delta, flutter their tail feathers, squawk at each other, and fly away.

Men from Ice Station Zebra came like blind sandworms to use the underground theater, PX, and radar equipment. More explosives than were dropped on Hiroshima sterilized its surface, man planted his technological masterpiece, and such desolation stretched across its lifeless face ~~even~~ the fish left. Perhaps it was some card Kissinger would play against Le Duc Tho, I don't know. It just seemed meaningless.

It was my forced maturation...no...more an initiation to a world of holocaust, dimly lit at its tunnel end, and a new vision of America with its formula for power--simple enough--that "might makes right." I was no longer innocent...and Lu far from the carefree twelve year-old I'd first found.