Chickenhawk by Robert Mason, first published by Viking-Penguin in 1983, is now in its 23rd printing.

Chickenhawk

(Chapers 1-4)

Author's Note

This is a personal narrative of what I saw in Vietnam and how it affected me. The events all happened; the chronology and geography are correct to the best of my knowledge. The names of the characters, other than the names that are famous, and unimportant characteristics of all the persons in the book have been changed so that they bear no resemblance to any of the actual people in order to preserve their privacy and anonymity.

I'd like to put in an apology to the grunts, if they resent that term, because I have nothing but respect for them and the conditions under which they served.

I hope that these recollections of my experiences will encourage other veterans to talk. I think it is impossible to know too much about the Vietnam era and its effects on individuals and society.

Instead of dwelling on the political aspects of the war, I have concentrated on the actual condition of being a helicopter pilot in Vietnam in 1965-66. The events, I hope, will speak for themselves.

I want to thank Martin Cruz Smith, Knox Burger, Gerald Howard, Constance Cincotti, Jack and Betty Mason, Gerald Towler, Bruce and Susan Doyle, and Jim and Eileen Helms for their generous aid and encouragement.

I am particularly indebted to my wife, Patience, for her unflagging support in difficult times, both in the writing of the book and in the life that it's about.

Prologue

I joined the army in 1964 to be a helicopter pilot. I knew at the time that I could theoretically be sent to a war, but I was ignorant enough to trust it would be a national emergency if I did go.

I knew nothing of Vietnam or its history. I did not know that the French had taken Vietnam, after twenty years of trying, in 1887. I did not know that our country had

once supported Ho Chi Minh against the Japanese during the Second World War. I did not know that after the war the country that thought it was finally free of colonialism was handed back to the French by occupying British forces with the consent of the Americans. I did not know that Ho Chi Minh then began fighting to drive the French out again, an effort that lasted from 1946 until the fall of the French at Dien Bien Phu, in 1954. I did not know that free elections scheduled by the Geneva Conference for 1956 were blocked because it was known that Ho Chi Minh would win. I did not know that our government backed an oppressive and corrupt leader, Ngo Dinh Diem, and later participated in his overthrow and his death, in 1963.

I did not know any of these facts. But the people who decided to have the war did.

I did know that I wanted to fly. And there was nothing I wanted to fly more than helicopters.

Chapter One
Wings

> The experimental division authorized to try out [the air assault] concept is stirring up the biggest inter-service controversy in years. There are some doubts about how practical such a helicopter-borne force would be in a real war.
>
> -US. News & World Report, April 20, 1964

June 1964-July 1965

As a child I had dreams of levitation. In these dreams I could float off the ground only when no one watched. The ability would leave me just when someone looked.

I was a farm kid. My father had operated his own and other farms, and a market, in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and West Virginia. When I was nine he started a large poultry farm west of Delray Beach, Florida. Here, in between chores, I daydreamed about flying to the extent that I actually built tall towers to get off the ground.

By the time I started high school my father had switched from farming to real estate, and we moved to town. In my junior year a friend, a fledgling pilot, taught me

the basics of handling a small plane. The airplane was a vast improvement over my dreamy mechanisms. It worked every time. By the time I graduated, I had a private pilot's license.

In 1962, after two years of sketchy attendance at the University of Florida, I dropped out to travel around the country.

A year later, in Philadelphia, two very important things happened to me. I met Patience, my wife-to-be, and I applied to be a pilot candidate in the army.

I thought I had finally achieved my goal of goals when I arrived at the U. S. Army Primary Helicopter School at Forth Wolters, Texas, in June 1964. I drove through the main gate. Helicopters flitted over the nearby mesas; helicopters crisscrossed overhead; helicopters swarmed everywhere. My companion, Ray Ward, craned his head out the window and grinned. He had also joined the army to fly helicopters.

We drove up to a group of concrete buildings that looked like dormitories. A sign out front said WARRANT OFFICER CANDIDATES REPORT HERE. We were impressed. Having gone through basic training at Fort Dix and a month of advanced infantry training at Fort Polk, we thought that all buildings in the army were World War II vintage, wooden and green. I stopped the car.

"Hey, this is nice." Ray smiled. "Ask that guy where we should put our baggage."

The guy he was referring to was walking quietly toward us, a sergeant wearing a white helmet and bright armbands. But we were no longer trainees and had no need to be afraid.

"Say, Sergeant," I asked amiably, "where should we put our luggage?"

"Luggage?" He flinched at the civilian word. Neither Ray nor I had on uniforms.

"Uh, yeah. We have to check in before five, and we need a place to change into our uniforms."

"You're candidates?" he asked calmly, quietly, with the ill-hidden contempt I had witnessed so many times before in basic training.

"Uh-huh." I nodded, bracing myself.

"What the fuck are you doing driving around here in civvies? You think you're tourists?"

"You get that car over there in that lot. Now! You will carry your luggage back here, double time! Now, git!"

"Yes, Sergeant," I said automatically. As I backed away, the sergeant watched, glaring, fists on hips.

"Turn the car around," said Ray.

"Not enough time." I backed all the way to the parking lot.

"Oh, shit," said Ray. "This is not gonna be a picnic."

Neither of us had suspected that the army taught people how to fly helicopters the same way they taught them to march and shoot. But they did.

The 120 candidates in our class were known as WOCs-for "warrant-officer candidates." A warrant officer is appointed, not commissioned, and specializes in a particular skill. There are electronic-technician warrants, supply warrants, and warrant-officer pilots, among many other specialties. The warrant ranks-WO- 1, CW2, CW-3, and CW-4--correspond to second lieutenant, first lieutenant, captain, and major, and warrant officers receive the same privileges and nearly the same pay as commissioned officers.

When I first heard of the warrant-officer-aviator program, I was a civilian and cared little what the rank meant. All I knew was that they flew.

The flight program was nine months long. It began with one month of preflight training and four months of primary flight training at Fort Wolters, followed by four more months of advanced flight training at Fort Rucker, Alabama. Preflight training was a harassment period designed to weed out candidates who lacked leadership potential. If you made it through that initiation, you got to the flight line and actually began to learn to fly. Then they tried to wash you out for mistakes or slowness in flight training, on top of the regular hassles in the warrant officer program.

Preflighters ran wherever they went, sat on the front edge of their chairs at the mess hall, and had to spit-shine the floors and keep precisely arranged clothing in their closets. We were allowed to leave the base only for two hours on Sunday, to go to church. It was the same kind of bullshit I had gone through in basic training, except worse.

The TAC sergeants assigned us to various slots in a student company: squad leaders, platoon leaders, first sergeant, platoon sergeants, and so on. One of us would be the student company commander. We would hold these positions for a week while

the instructors tried to drive us crazy and graded our reactions. Unfortunately I was assigned to be the first student company commander.

Some seasoned army veterans had volunteered to be flight candidates. Others, like Ray and me, were just out of basic. To be fair, God should have put one of the experienced guys in the company-commander slot. But God, personified in the form of TAC Sergeant Wayne Malone, was seldom fair.

My first official act as the student CO was to get the company to the mess hall, four blocks away. Pretty simple stuff. Attention. Left face. Forward, march. Stop. Eat.

But Sergeant Malone, his fellows, and the senior classmen created obstacles. They stood directly in front of me, yelling in my face, while I tried to tell the company to come to attention.

"Well, candidate. Are you going to the mess hall or not?" screamed a senior classman whose nose almost touched mine.

"Yes, sir. If you'd get out of my way, I'll-"

"What?" Shock and disbelief. "Get out of your way!" Immediately my antagonist was joined by others.

"Candidate, you can't talk to your superiors like that!"... "Get this mob to the mess hall before they close the place!"

"Yes, sir!" I could barely hear my own voice. "Company, attention!" I yelled. No one heard me over the screaming TAC sergeants and seniors.

"They can't hear you," yelled a senior, his breath blasting into my face.

I tried again. Still, no one could hear. I raised my arm straight up and back down and heard a student platoon leader yell, "Attention!" Command hand signals?

As soon as my classmates came to attention, some seniors leapt among the ranks, yelling, "Did you hear him call attention, candidate? Then why did you come to attention, candidate? There are no arm signals for attention, candidate!" And so on. Eventually, because the mess hall would close, they allowed my commands to get through.

Then it was double time to the mess hall, and chin-ups and push-ups outside. Inside, we sat on the edge of our chairs and ate with our forks rising vertically from the plate and making a right angle to the mouth. Harassment is common to all officer-candidate schools, but what did it have to do with flying? The answer is that

everybody in the army is a soldier first, his specialty second. It was going to be a long nine months.

During that first week, I had to get us to classes on time, see that our rooms were perfect, and God forbid anyone had a dirty belt buckle. I never broke down and cried during the hazing, as some did, but my reaction was still unsatisfactory. I returned the glaring screams of the hazers with glaring screams of my own. Resistance plus obvious inexperience got me a poor grade for my turn at command. Sergeant Malone, who kept a plaque in his office inscribed Woccus Eliminatus, would often whisper in my ear while I stood in formation, "You'll never make it, candidate." And when the four weeks of preflight ended, Malone had indeed put me on the list of twenty-eight candidates who would go before the elimination board.

I remember feeling sick in a dim hallway the night before I was to see the board. I had failed before I had even gotten a chance to sit in a helicopter. If they washed me out of flight school, I would have to serve my remaining three years of enlistment as an infantryman. The embarrassment was intolerable. Ray Ward and I had come through basic and advanced infantry training to get to flight school, and I had failed in the first month. Ray had encouraged me before the list was posted, telling me that I had really done well, that they weren't going to eliminate me. I remembered Malone's whispered threats. Also, a TAC officer announced that I was definitely not pilot material, based on his analysis of my handwriting. I knew I'd be on that list. I was.

Patience and I had decided that she and our one-month-old son, Jack, would live with my parents in florida until I had made it past preflight. Then they would come out to Texas and live near the base. I almost called to tell her I had blown it. I couldn't. I decided to wait until after the elimination board.

The next day, the board called in the twenty-eight doomed candidates one by one. By the time my name was called, after lunch, I was numb. I remember walking into the board room tingling with fear and energy. I sat on the edge of a chair in the middle of the room. A major looked at me for a few moments and then at the report in front of him. Seven other members of the board watched me closely. A stenographer's fingers moved at a machine when the major spoke.

"It says here that you failed to show any sort of enthusiasm in the leadership drills. Your instructors say you weren't interested in participating seriously when you were selected to be the student company commander."

And then I talked. I can't remember exactly what I said, but I said it calmly and rationally, opposite from the way I felt. I told them I was just out of basic and inexperienced. I was very serious about getting through this school, but I might not have shown it. I had been flying since I was seventeen. "I want to be a helicopter pilot," I said. "I've studied for that, and I think my grades from ground school prove it. When I'm out there someday flying soldiers around, I expect to be one of the best pilots that ever came out of this school. Won't you give me that chance?" I went on for five minutes.

The stenographer nodded that the words were down. The major made a mark in my folder. "Wait in the company area until you hear from me.

I waited with packed duffel bags, watching my classmates avoid me and the other washouts. When a runner from the office called my name, I jumped out of my skin. I burst through the door at the student company headquarters, came to attention, and screamed, "Candidate Mason reporting as ordered, Sergeant!"

Malone only looked at my feet and screamed, "You missed the white line, candidate! Go out and try again."

I about-faced, went outside, and tried again to hit the painted white line in front of Malone's desk with just the tips of my boots, without looking down. After two more attempts, I succeeded. Malone swaggered menacingly up to me, coming in from the side. My eyes were glued to the wall in front of me. Malone talked into my ear.

"It pains me to tell you, candidate, that the elimination board, in its infinite wisdom, has decided to reinstate your ass."

I turned, grinning at the news.

"Eyes front, candidate!" My head snapped to the front. "Yes, they have decided to reinstate you, over my violent objections, I might add. So get your lucky ass out of here and go join your classmates. Git!"

I turned and ran out the door, laughing all the way back to the bar-racks. I called Patience and told her to come.

The next morning, I was called back to the office. The board's decision to reinstate me had ruined the student-instructor ratio at the flight line. Malone grinned. "So,

Candidate Mason, you will be starting preflight all over again with the next class. Maybe this time I'll see you eliminated."

The second time through preflight was much easier. I had already taken all the classes, so I scored terrific grades on every test. I had learned to play the leadership game with great zeal. I became the almost perfect preflight candidate, but Malone said, "You've had plenty of practice, Candidate Mason."

Two months after I had driven through the main gates, I finally got to the flight line. We were issued flight suits, flight helmets, flight gloves, sunglasses, Jeppson course plotters, wind-face computers, and new textbooks. We were told to wear our hats backward on the flight line, the traditional mark of the unsoloed pilot candidate. We still ran everywhere else, but we were driven to the flight line. We were starting the real business of this school.

We marched into a low building adjacent to the main heliport and sat at gray tables, four candidates to a table. The flight leader gave us a brief talk and then the IPs (instructor pilots) came into the room. IPs were mythical beings whom we held in the highest respect. They were civilians. We had heard a hundred stories about their training methods, their short tempers, and how they liked to get rid of students so they would have a lighter load. They strode through the door wearing the same gray flight suits we wore, a kind of mechanic's coverall with a crotch-to neck zipper and a dozen pockets all over it. The IPs had 5ornething sticking out of each pocket. We knew they were privileged by how sloppy they were.

The IP who came to our table would take the four of us on our orientation flight, the only "free ride" in the course. We had been preparing for this day by studying helicopter controls and basic flight maneuvers. Many of us felt we could fly in an hour or so.

I had spent many evenings in my room reviewing the flight controls, what they did, and how I would have to move my hands and feet. I could hear the ground school's aerodynamics instructor in my head. "The names of the controls in a helicopter refer to their effect on the rotating wings and the tail rotor," the voice would say. "The disk formed by the rotor blades is what really flies. The rest of the fuselage simply follows along suspended from the disk by the mast." In my chair I formed a strong mental image of this disk spinning over my head. Then I would start to review the

controls. "The collective control stick is located on the left side of the pilot's seat. Pulling it up increases the pitch angle of both main rotor blades at the same time, collectively, causing the disk, and the helicopter, to rise. Lowering the collective reduces the pitch, and the disk descends. The throttle twist grip on the end of the collective stick has to be coordinated with the up and down movements. You must twist in more throttle as you raise the collective, and roll it off as you lower it." I raised and lowered my left hand by my side, twisting it from side to side as I did.

"The cyclic control stick rises vertically from the cockpit floor between the pilot's legs. Moving the cyclic stick in any horizontal direction causes the rotating wings to increase their pitch and move higher on one half of their cycle while feathering on the other half. This cyclic change of pitch causes the disk they form to tilt and move in the same direction as the cyclic stick is pushed." Now, along with my left hand moving up and down and twisting, my right hand moved in small circles above my knees as, in my mind, I flew.

"The force that rotates the main rotor system clockwise as seen from the cockpit also tries to rotate the fuselage under it in the opposite direction. This effect is known as torque. The way it is controlled is with the antitorque rotor, the tail rotor located at the end of the tail boom. When it is spinning, it pushes the tail sideways against the torque. The amount of push, and therefore the direction the nose points, is controlled by pushing the foot pedals. Pushing the left pedal increases the tail rotor pitch, which pushes the tail to the right, against the torque, moving the nose to the left. The right pedal reduces the pitch and allows the torque to move the nose to the right. Because this left-and-right turning requires more and less power, you will have to adjust the throttle accordingly to maintain the proper engine and rotor rpm. Got that?"

I thought I did. I moved my left hand up and down, twisting it, to control the imaginary collective and throttle; my right hand moved in small circles, pretending to control a cyclic; my feet controlled the tail rotor by pumping back and forth. Eventually I could do all these movements simultaneously. These exercises and the fact that I already had a fixed-wing pilot's license gave rise to the fantasy that I would be able to fly a helicopter on the first try.

"Okay. See that tree out there?" The orientation instructor's gravelly voice hissed in my earphones. I was finally getting my chance. The instructor held the H-23 Hiller trainer in a hover in the middle of a ten-acre field.

"Yes, sir," I said, squeezing the intercom switch on the cyclic stick.

"Well, I'm gonna take care of the rest of the controls, and all I want you to do is to keep this bird pointed in the direction of that tree." He jutted his chin forward. I nodded. "You got that?"

"Yes, sir." My senses were overwhelmed by the clamor and bouncing and vibrations of the H-23. The blades whirled crazily overhead; parts studied in ground school in static drawings now spun relentlessly and vibrated, powered by the roaring, growling engine behind my back. All the parts wanted to go their own way, but somehow the instructor was controlling them, averaging their various motions into a position three feet above the grass. We floated above the ground, gently rising and falling on an invisible sea.

"Okay, you've got it," my instructor said. I pushed first one and then the other of the spongy pedals, trying to turn the machine while the instructor controlled the cyclic and collective. All I had to do was point the helicopter at the tree. The tree swung wildly one way and then the other.

"You see the tree I'm talking about?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, try to keep us pointed that way, if you don't mind." This instructor, like all the IPs in the primary phase of instruction, was a civilian who'd been in the military. The fact that they were now civilians did not cramp their cynical teaching style.

I concentrated even harder. What could be wrong with me? I al

ready knew how to fly airplanes. I thoroughly understood the theory of controlling helicopters. I knew what the controls did. Why couldn't I keep that goddamn tree in front of us? Swinging back and forth in narrowing arcs, learning to anticipate the mushy response in the pedals, I finally succeeded in keeping the tree in front of us most of the time, plus or minus twenty degrees anyway.

"Not bad."

"Thank you, sir."

"Now that you have got the pedals down nice and good like you do, maybe we ought to show you how this collective-pitch stick works."

"Okay, sir."

"What I'm going to do is to take all the controls again"-the IP put his feet back on the pedals, and the tree immediately popped to a stable position dead ahead of us-"and then let you try your luck with the collective. Just the collective. Try to keep us about this high off the ground. Okay?"

"Yes, sir."

"You got it." This phrase always preceded the transfer of control.

"I've got it." The moment I grabbed the collective stick in my left hand, the helicopter, the same helicopter that had been sitting placidly at three feet, lurched to five feet. It seemed to push itself up. I pushed down too hard to correct. We strained up against the harnesses as the ship dropped. I panicked and over controlled again as the ground rushed up. I pulled up too hard, causing us to pop back up to six or seven feet.

"About three feet would be fine."

"Yes, sir." Sweat dripped off me as I fought to achieve a stable altitude above the ground. It wasn't a matter of just putting the collective in one position and leaving it there; constant corrections had to be made. After a few minutes of yo-yo-ing up and down I was able to keep the machine about where the IP wanted it.

"That's real good. You're a natural, kid."

"Thank you, sir.

"I've got it." The IP took control of the collective. "One small thing you're going to have to know is that when you pull up with the collective, that takes more power, which causes more torque, which means you have to push a little left pedal to compensate. You have to push a little right pedal as you reduce the collective."

"Yes, sir."

"The next control we're going to try is this here cyclic stick. You don't move this one much, see." I looked at the IP's right hand as it held the cyclic-control grip. It was moving plenty. The top of the cyclic vibrated in agitated harmony with the shaking machine.

"It looks like it's moving a lot to me, sir."

"I didn't say it wasn't moving; I said you don't move it much. There's a difference. The H-23 is famous for the excessive motion of its cyclic. That's the feedback from all that unbalanced crap spinning around up there. Try it for a while. You got it."

"I got it." I put my hand on the wavering cyclic grip between my knees. I could feel strong mechanical tremors vibrating in many directions within my white-knuckled grasp. The IP had the rest of the controls. The H-23 held its position for a few seconds and then began drifting off to the left. I pushed the tugging grip to the right to correct. Nothing seemed to happen. We still drifted left. I moved the grip farther to the right. The ship then stopped its leftward drift, but instead of staying stable, like I thought it would, it leaned over to the right and drifted in that direction. It felt like there was no direct control of the machine. I pulled the cyclic back to the left quickly, to correct, but the machine continued to the right. The helicopter was taking on a personality, a stubborn personality. Whoa, I thought to the machine-turned-beast. Whoa, goddamn it. I increased pressure away from its drifting, and once again it halted, seemingly under control, and then drifted off in another direction.

"I would like it better if you kept the helicopter over one spot or another that we both know about, if you don't mind."

"Yes, sir." After a series of hesitating lurches in many different directions, I finally caught on to the control delay in the cyclic. After five minutes of sweaty concentration I was able to keep it within a ten-foot square.

"Well, you got it now, ace."

"Thank you, sir."

"Next thing to do, now that you've got the cyclic down, is to let you try all the controls at once. Think you're up to that, kid?"

"Yes, sir."

"Okay, you got it."

"I got it." The cyclic tugged, the collective pushed, and the pedals slapped my feet, but for a brief moment I was in complete control. I was three feet off the ground hovering in a real helicopter. A grin was forming on my sweaty face. Whoops. The illusion of control ended abruptly. As I concentrated on keeping us over one spot with the cyclic, we climbed. When I pushed the collective back down to correct, I noticed we were drifting backward, fast. I corrected by pushing forward. Now I noticed we were facing ninety degrees away from where we started. I corrected with the pedals. Each control fought me independently. I forgot about having to push the left pedal when I raised the collective. I forgot the cyclic-control lag. We whirled and grumbled in a variety of confusing directions, attitudes and altitudes all at once.

There were absolutely too many things to control. The IP, brave man that he was, let the ship lurch and roar and spin all over that field while I pushed the pedals, pumped the collective, and swept the cyclic around, with little effect. I felt like I had a handful of severed reins and a runaway team of horses heading for a cliff. I could not keep the machine anywhere near where I wanted it.

"I got it." The IP took over the controls. The engine and rotor rpm went back to the green. We drifted down from fifteen feet to three, pointed away from the sun and back to the tree, and moved back to the spot where we had started. I felt totally defeated.

"Well, it's true what they say about you all right, ace."

"What's that, sir?"

"You're a natural."

"A natural? Sir, I was all over the field."

"Don't worry about it, kid. We'll just keep practicing in smaller and smaller fields."

Our actual flight training with our regular instructors began the following day at a stage field, one of many scattered over the central Texas prairies. The stage fields provided each flight with a private airfield, thereby separating advanced and beginning students. The first challenge was to solo. To this end, the IP concentrated on basic maneuvers like hovering, takeoffs, landings, and simulated forced landings, which are called "autorotations."

The army taught us to fly the machine as if the engine would quit at any moment. Throughout training, whether you were trying to hover, take off, land, or just cruise, the IP would cut the power, to see how you'd react. When he decided you might survive a real emergency alone, then you would solo.

My IP, Tom Anderson, would wait to cut the power until we were crabbing sideways or bucking in somebody's rotor wash or ballooning too high in a hover. He wanted to see how we would react when everything else was going wrong. There was no way you could be ready for it. We learned to react automatically when the power quit.

There were two ways to autorotate. In a hover, you held the collective where it was when the power was cut until the skids were six inches from the ground; then you pulled it up to cushion the landing. In flight, you immediately pushed the collective

fully down to neutralize the pitch angle. With the pitch flat, the rotors would continue spinning, providing lift, as the helicopter descended. If you held the collective in flying position, the rotor blades would slow and stop. Because the rotor blades were rigid only by virtue of the centrifugal force of their spinning, the stopped blades would simply fold up and the helicopter would fall like a streamlined anvil. It was fatal not to push the collective down. Autorotations were quick. A Hiller in autorotation descends at 1700 feet per minute. From 500 feet we had twenty seconds to react to the power failure, bottom the pitch, find a spot, and land. In this short glide you maneuvered the machine to any clearing in range. At roughly fifty feet from the ground you pulled the cyclic back, making the ship flare, trying to slow it from 45 knots to zero. With the nose high in the flare, you waited until the tail rotor was close to the ground, pulled a little pitch, and leveled the ship. You saved the rest of the pitch to cushion the landing. That was how it was supposed to go.

At first I hit the ground too hard, or pulled the pitch too soon, or landed crooked. After bouncing around awhile, practicing hovering autorotations in the parking area and down the lane at the stage field, we'd get to the takeoff mark at the end of one of six lanes. There I would attempt to hover the machine, talk to the tower, and be ready for a hovering autorotation at any moment.

"Zero-seven-nine lane three for takeoff." After saying this, I would turn ninety degrees, wait for clearance, and make the takeoff.

For takeoff from a hover, you pushed the cyclic slightly forward and added a little power by pulling up on the collective, twisting the throttle appropriately to maintain rpm. The helicopter would accelerate across the ground, pretty much at hover altitude, until it reached the point of translational lift. Translational lift was that speed-in the H-23 trainer it was about 20 miles an hour-at which the rotor system moved into undisturbed air and suddenly became more efficient. At that point you could feel it jump into the climb. (That is how overloaded helicopters, unable to hover, can still fly if they make running takeoffs.) From translational lift you attempted to hold a constant airspeed and climb rate until you reached the altitude where you turned to follow the traffic pattern. Because there were six lanes at the stage fields, staying accurately in the traffic pattern was crucial. Midair collisions were not uncommon between students.

Once airborne, we were subject to autorotations on each leg of the rectangular pattern. After we took a few turns around the pattern, practicing landings and takeoffs, the IPs usually took us out to the surrounding countryside and had us work on cruising flight and autorotations.

We spent an hour each day in the cockpit and three or four hours in the bleachers watching our classmates. We read the flight-school syllabus of maneuvers. We attended ground-school classes in aerodynamics, weather, and maintenance. We lived and breathed flying. We waited expectantly for the first of our classmates to solo.

After two weeks, one did. We threw him into a pond, the traditional honor after the first solo. He could also wear his hat forward. By the end of the third week, nearly half the class had been thrown into the pond and were wearing their hats forward, and I was one of them. At the end of the fourth week, those who hadn't been able to solo were eliminated from flight training.

The next challenge was to learn all the primary maneuvers well enough to pass a check ride in four more weeks. We flew more often. Each day, I flew an hour of dual with Anderson. Additionally, he assigned us another hour-and-a-half solo in which to eliminate whatever errors he had pointed out. When next we flew dual, we would be expected to demonstrate improvement. Pleasing the IP meant becoming a pilot and a warrant officer instead of a pfc infantryman. Getting the maneuvers right in the air, and worrying about them on the ground, became a total occupation.

The IPs believed that student errors were premeditated attempts on their lives, and reacted accordingly. (When later I became an IP at the same school, I shared this feeling.) The IPs had several different ways of showing their displeasure. Most of them shouted over the intercom at every repeated mistake. At least one of them hit his students with a stick. All of them used bad grades to underline bad performance. Tom Anderson, however, used extreme disappointment to point out our mistakes.

A week before I was to take my primary check ride, Anderson cut the power as I cruised toward the stage field. I bottomed the pitch immediately, turned into the wind (everything that flies lands into the wind-it reduces ground speed at touchdown), and glided down in autorotation, just like an automaton. I was very proud of the fact that I had remembered to bottom the pitch satisfactorily, and was intent on landing straight ahead, into the wind. But Anderson had picked a place where to turn into the

wind was also to turn toward some huge power lines. Being a dumb candidate, I was, concentrating on doing the maneuver by the numbers. I noticed Anderson shaking his head forlornly, out of the corner of my eye. My feeling of pride and competence turned to stark terror. I saw the power lines. I turned abruptly away from them, but I was now very low, heading for a stand of trees. Anderson kept shaking his head sadly.

"I've got it," said Anderson. A hopeless tone in his voice completed the rest of the sentence wordlessly. "I've got it, asshole." I nodded my head in agreement. How could I have not seen all those wires? Anderson restored the helicopter to intelligent control, brought back the power, and nursed us gently away from the trees. He looked like he was attending a funeral.

"Bob, if you land in the wires, you will get killed." At that moment, I would have preferred death to his disappointment. Back at cruising altitude, he gave me the controls again. "Let's just go to the stage field. Maybe you can land without hurting us?" He sighed.

I nodded eagerly. I would definitely get us back okay. "I've got it," I said.

Anderson nodded and sat back with his arms folded. When I turned to look for the stage field, he cut the power again-at the same place, with the same power lines. This time I looked for a clear spot first, then maneuvered to approach it into the wind. Anderson just sat there. When we were fifty feet from the clearing I had picked and he hadn't taken over the controls, I knew he was going to let me go all the way. I hit the ground and skidded twenty feet into a shallow ditch I hadn't seen and came to a halt.

"That's more like it," he said, smiling.

I knew then that I would pass my primary check ride.

After the check ride we concentrated on advanced maneuvers: takeoffs and landings in confined areas and pinnacles, cross-country navigation, night flying, night autorotations.

Anderson very carefully demonstrated the flight school's procedure for getting into and out of confined areas. It was a method designed to minimize damage. A student helicopter pilot wallowing around in a hover in a tight clearing is an accident waiting to happen. You circled the clearing you picked until you had determined the best approach path over the lowest obstacles, into the wind. You would then pick a spot in

the clearing and make your landing. On the ground, you would lock the collective down and the throttle at idle position and get out of the helicopter, leaving it running. You put a rock or a stick under the chin bubble so you could see it from inside. Then you went to the downwind side of the clearing, paced a distance equal to the length of the helicopter plus five paces safety margin back from the nearest obstacle, and deposited another marker. Then you pace4 it out to see if you were able to turn around in a hover over the first marker without hitting the trees at the upwind side of the clearing. If you could, you were finished analyzing the area and could get back into the machine. If you couldn't turn it and were going to have to hover backward from the upwind marker to the downwind marker, you had to install a line of markers between the two points as a guide for your rearward flight.

Each clearing was different. Some required much pacing and marking to get out of. Others were so big and free of obstacles that the drill of placing markers seemed pointless. Months later, in Vietnam, I realized that I automatically analyzed each clearing before I landed. The drill worked.

Anderson sometimes took two of his students on a demonstration ride, to save time. One day we landed in a very small, confined area marked with a red tire, signifying that it was to be used only with an IP Hovering at the front of the clearing, the tail rotor was only a few feet from the rear. Anderson backed the helicopter a few feet and tried to take off. Several factors were against us. One, it was a very hot day, making the density altitude very high, giving us less than normal lift. (Air density is corrected for altitude, temperature, and humidity. Hot, humid air raises the density altitude; cold, dry air lowers it.) Two, the machine was overloaded for this density altitude. (This was a common flying condition in Vietnam.) Anderson made one attempt to get over the trees in front of us and had to abort the takeoff midway, sliding backward into the clearing. The ship would not go. I offered to get out and walk to a nearby field.

"Not necessary," said Anderson. He picked up to a hover and began to circle around in the tiny clearing, just missing the trees with the rotors. My classmate and I thought he had gone nuts. But after two tight turns we could see what he was trying to do. He was accelerating in a circle to translational-lift speed. When the ship lurched into translational lift, Anderson aimed for the gap between two trees and

went. He made it. It was a much tighter fit than a student would be allowed to try, but he made it. I never forgot that takeoff. There is always a way.

A few days later I ended my five months at Fort Wolters with an hour-long, sweaty check ride in which I successfully demonstrated my abilities to the army inspector. Our class was to continue the course at Fort Rucker.

We arrived with eighty-five hours of flight time from Wolters. We logged eighty-eight more in the H- 19 Sikorsky, learning to do confined areas without markers, landing on pinnacles, and doing lots of cross-country and tactical flying. During the last month we would log twenty-seven hours in the ship everybody lusted to fly: the Bell HU-l Iroquois, known as the Huey. Huey time was divided between ten hours of orientation and seventeen hours of instrument flying.

Though the flight training progressed noticeably, our status did not. We had become senior candidates at Wolters, only to begin over again as junior classmen at Rucker. It wasn't a complete regression, though. Married students were allowed to live off base with their wives.

The two trainers we flew at Rucker occupied two poles in the technological development of helicopters. The H-19 Sikorsky, which looked like a giant tadpole with four wheels, was so tall there were built-in steps leading from the ground to the cockpit. The monster was powered by a heavy, thirteen-cylinder radial engine that took up a large percentage of its potential cargo capacity. The ten seats in its hold, filled with passengers, rendered the machine unhoverable on most days. It had to make running takeoffs even with moderate loads.

The Huey, on the other hand, with its powerful, lightweight engine, had power to spare. It could hover and take off with ten passengers and a crew of two. It was also quiet, started easily on cold mornings, and was simpler to maintain. Flying the two ships was a telescoped course in the development of helicopters.

For all its drawbacks, the H- 19 was still a good trainer. The H-23 had had direct mechanical linkages to control the rotor system and required heavy-handed operation. The H- 19 had hydraulic controls which required a light touch. Its sensitive controls, coupled with its underpowered bulk, made it fly like an overloaded Huey.

We expected to jump into the new trainer and show our new IPs we were pilots. On my first try, as happened to everybody else, the H-19 just sank to the ground when the IP let me have the controls.

"The reason you're sinking is because you're moving the cyclic too much. That dumps the air cushion from under the disk. Use pressure. If you can see the controls move, that's too much. If nothing else, flying this machine will teach you subtlety on the controls."

And so it did. In a few hours I didn't think about the control response at all. I even enjoyed flying the monster.

The last twenty hours or so in the H- 19 were spent in the field, simulating air assaults in student aviation companies. We flew reconnaissance missions, day and night cross-country, and were given turns at planning and leading air assaults composed of many ships flying in loose formation.

Near the end of our training with the H-19 we began to see more and more of the Huey in our ground-school classes.

"The Huey is the army's latest utility helicopter," said the narrator of a training film. A Huey flying low level filled the screen. The camera zoomed in to the main rotor hub spinning above the engine nacelle. "The T53-L- 11 gas-turbine engine develops eleven hundred horsepower yet weighs only five hundred pounds. The turbine is basically a jet engine with a fan placed in the exhaust." An animation showed an engine cutaway. A twelve-inch-diameter turbine fan spun in the gases be. hind a jet engine. "This single turbine fan is connected by a shaft running back through the engine to the transmission. The pressure of the gases pushing through this fan generates sufficient force to turn the forty-eight-foot rotor system and the eight-foot tail-rotor assembly and lift the 5000-pound machine plus a maximum load of 4500 pounds into the air." The animation dissolved to a Huey banking away to swoop down to a jungle. "The Huey's streamlined design allows a maximum cruise speed of 120 knots." We laughed at this point, because our H19s flew at 80 knots. The film showed a Huey sitting in a clearing. As the announcer spoke, the craft began to rise vertically. "Though not recommended, the Huey is capable of hovering vertically up to an altitude of 10,000 feet on a standard day." The film went on to show how it was variously configured as an air ambulance (Medevac) carrying six litters; as a gunship (Guns) carrying pilot-directed machine guns, rockets, or grenade

launchers; and as a troop carrier (Slick) with room for ten soldiers and two crew-operated door guns.

My first impression of the machine was that it was pure silk. When the IP squeezed the starter trigger on the collective, the response was a shrill whine as the high-speed starter motor began slowly to move the blades, not the clacking cough and roar I was used to. At operating speed there was no roaring, vibrating, or shaking, just a smooth whine from the turbine. The IP signaled me to pull up the collective. The big rotors thudded a little as they increased their pitch, and the machine left the ground like it was falling up.

I overcontrolled the pedals, making the tail wag back and forth. This was a common reaction to the sensitive controls and was called the "Huey shuffle."

The heavy, thudding noise of the main rotors-the characteristic wop-wop-wop sound-was caused by their huge size, 48 feet from tip to tip, and a 21-inch chord (width). With ballast weights at each blade tip, the whirling rotor system had tremendous inertia. The IP demonstrated this inertia with a trick that only a Huey could do. On the ground at normal rotor speed (330 rpm) he cut the power, picked the machine up to a four-foot hover, turned completely around, and set it back on the ground. Incredible! Any other helicopter would just sit there, not rising an inch, while the rotors slowed down. These big metal blades with the weights in the tips would serve me well in Vietnam. Their strength and inertia allowed them to chop small tree branches with ease.

During this orientation period in the Huey, Patience drilled me at home on the checklist. Her method was negative reinforcement. She kicked me in the shins at each mistake. I learned it so well that even now, when I recall the Huey cockpit check, I get a twinge in my leg.

Flying an hour each day, it took two weeks to finish the orientation in the Huey. Next was instrument flying.

We were one of the first classes to get instrument training. Helicopter pilots traditionally maintained eye contact with the ground. To the old pilots, VFR (visual flight rules) and IFR (instrument flight rules) were one and the same: "visually follow roads" and "I follow roads." If a storm got bad, you just flew slower and lower. If it got real bad, you stopped in a field. That innocent philosophy was coming

to an end. The helicopter was going to war; in war you can't fly slower and lower or stop just because the weather is bad.

I enjoyed the instrument training very much. You got into a Huey with an instructor, put on the hood (a device which restricted your vision to inside the cockpit), flew all over Alabama, making practice landings at airports you never saw, and returned an hour or two later, never having seen the ground or the sky or anything except the inside of the cockpit. On my final check ride I flew from Fort Rucker down to Gainesville, Florida and back, making four approaches to strange airfields and two course intersections. The dreamlike flight lasted four hours. The only clues that I was flying were moving needles in gauges and radio conversations with various control towers. I had to use this training only a few times in Vietnam, but it saved lives when I did.

On May II, 1965, we got our warrant-officer bars and our silver wings. My father and sister and Patience and Jack were there to see me graduate. (My mother was sick, and couldn't attend.) I was very proud. It had been the most eventful ten months of my twenty-three years.

Sixty percent of our class were sent immediately to Vietnam. I was among the forty percent who thought they had somehow lucked out by getting assignments in the States. This was an illusion. I had asked for and been assigned to the 3rd Transportation Company, Fort Belvoir, Virginia-the VIP flight. This unit flew congressmen and senators around Washington and maintained a twenty-four-hour scramble-alert status to rush certain people to underground installations in case of Bad Times. The tour was traditionally eighteen months to two years. This duty was too good for brand-new pilots. It was where you went as an old salt. The post was manicured; the local town, Washington, D.C., was fun; and the officers' club was posh, overlooking the Potomac. We were too dumb to realize that we had been sent here just to be in a holding pattern for a few weeks. Patience and I went out shopping for furniture for the first apartment since our marriage.

For a few weeks life was okay. I got up in the mornings, put on my orange flight suit, and drove ten miles to the airfield. There I spent two or three hours transitioning into the tandem-rotor Piasecki. After that I would sit around and talk flying with the other pilots.

Some of the pilots had been to Vietnam. They told us that you could get a stereo in Saigon for about a third of what it cost in the States. That's what I knew of Vietnam: It was a good place to buy stereo equipment. Many of those pilots had flown in support of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) in a nine-to-five war whose objective was to gain control of the South Vietnamese in the face of Ho Chi Minh's popularity. The Vietnamese Communists in the South-the Vietcong, or VC, as they were called-hadn't stopped fighting since President Diem had refused to hold the scheduled free elections in 1956. I didn't know these facts then, but I did know that these pilots talked of the ARVNs as reluctant warriors in an American operation. They had used helicopters to lift the ARVNs to battles they almost always lost. Meanwhile, the VC continued to gain strength.

Three weeks after arriving, I received orders to report to Fort Benning, Georgia. The orders were not accompanied by explanations.

"What the fuck is at Fort Benning?" I asked a friend who had received the same orders.

"I hear they're forming up a big, new division. Probably we're going to Vietnam."

"Huh?"

At Fort Benning was the 11th Air Assault Division (Test), which had been developing and testing helicopter air-assault techniques for more than two years. After several big war games in the Carolinas, in which the 11th Air Assault fought a simulated enemy played by elements of the 101st Airborne Division, it was decided that the techniques did indeed work and that an actual air-assault division should be formed and sent to the interior of Vietnam. Since there were all these helicopters and pilots already there, they simply changed the name of the test division to the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) and acquired more pilots and aircraft to bring it up to full strength.

Hundreds of pilots arrived at Benning in the middle of June, but until July 28 we were told that there was no special reason for this buildup. "There's no truth to the rumors that we're going to Vietnam, but don't sign a lease" was how they put it.

We were given a rush course in some of the combat techniques the old salts from the test division had devised. Their specialty was low-level flying, called "contour flying." This technique was supposed to keep exposure to ground fire to a minimum.

They had a special low-level route called a "confidence course" where we were taught tricks like flying under power lines and making low-level turns so steep the rotor tips nearly touched the ground. These guys were cowboys.

On one flight with an old salt named Bill James, I experienced the lowest and fastest helicopter ride I had ever seen. With three air-force pilots along for the ride, James flew along a railroad track bordered by tall trees. At more than 100 knots, he squeezed the fuselage down into this channel of trees while the rotor just brushed the tops. It was blinding. The air-force pilots screamed, "He's crazy! Tell him to stop! Stop!" James accelerated when he heard them yell. At 120 knots, between two rows of trees, the world is a green blur. I had no idea how James was able to see what he was doing.

Another procedure the old salts had refined was formation flying. In flight school our formations could be defined as two or more helicopters flying within sight of each other in the same sky. We had not been taught close formation flying, because it was considered too dangerous. But to get a flight of four Hueys into a small landing zone (LZ) at the same time required that they fly, land, and take off very close together.

Closeness was measured in rotor diameters. The range for the old salts was from one to three rotor diameters. In actual practice they flew at one or less. When I first experienced this, visions of commingling, counterrotating, and splintering rotor blades danced in my head. There was also talk that these daredevils flew with their rotor blades overlapped by several feet, just for fun.

I saw these techniques-the low-level, the close formations-performed much more often than I did them. We had very little time. The new pilots would be getting their Huey experience and air-assault training on the job in Vietnam.

When they announced that we must turn in all our underwear to have it dyed olive green, and that we were to paint our flight helmets the same color, we knew the time was near. On July 28 I heard President Johnson announce on television, "We will stand in Vietnam," and "I have today ordered to Vietnam the Air Mobile Division." A tingle of fear mixed with excitement came over me. The games were over. Life was getting very serious for helicopter pilots.

The next day, in a moment of grim rationality, I bought a double-barrel derringer as a secret, last-ditch weapon.

My sister, Susan, was up from Florida to pick up Patience and Jack. I was feeling very cheated. I hadn't got a chance to live even one month as a normal human with my wife and son. Now I was going away for a year, or maybe forever. Patience and Jack had lived five months in a sweaty room in Texas, four months in a trailer in Alabama, a month in an empty apartment in Virginia, and now another month in another trailer in Georgia. I felt I had not provided very well for them, and now, to top it off, I was leaving.

To make it even worse, I wasn't a believer. Now that I was interested enough to read about it, I thought the Vietnamese ought to be able to decide what kind of government they wanted, just like we had. If they wanted to be Communists, then they ought to be. They probably wouldn't like Communism; but, then, everybody has to make his own mistakes. If democratic capitalism was better for them, then they'd fight for it.

Probably my feeling that the Vietnam war was a crock was spawned by my fear of dying young. It was a revelation, political or not, that came too late. I was going. I owed the army three years of service for teaching me to fly helicopters. And there you had it.

I held Jack, and together we smiled at the camera. Patience snapped the shutter. We all got in the car and drove to the fort. While soldiers piled duffel bags into buses, I held Patience, and she cried. I watched, numb, as my sister, my wife, and my son got into the car and drove away. In the parking lot, surrounded by hundreds of green-clothed men milling around Greyhound buses, I felt very lonely.

We drove from Columbus to Mobile to board the USNS Croatan. It took four aircraft carriers, six troop carriers, and seven cargo ships to move the entire division to the other side of the world. An advance party of a thousand men was being flown over to meet us at our highlands campsite near the village of An Khe.

We boarded. I wrestled my enormous flight bag through the turns of the dark passageways. The heavy bag tore the button off the front of my uniform as I stepped through the hatchways. The air was still and musty; the steel walls were scaly with rust. I came out onto a deck that was under the overhanging flight deck. I pulled the

bag over to the hatchway, trying to figure how to get it down without breaking anything.

"Throw it down, Chief," the warrant at the bottom of the ladder yelled. He was standing on the deck where we would be quartered.

"This bag?" I said.

"Yeah, sure, throw it down to me. You can't carry it down."

"This bag weighs as much as I do."

"Look, Chief, you want to cause a traffic jam? Throw it down to me."

As I tossed the bag down the ladder well, the warrant stepped back. The bag crashed on the steel deck.

"I thought you were going to catch it."

"Did I say that?" grinned the warrant. "That's your bunk over there. Have a nice trip."

Chapter Two
An August Cruise

We do not want an expanding struggle with consequences that no one can foresee, nor will we bluster or bully or flaunt our power. But we will not surrender and we will not retreat.

-Lyndon Johnson, July 28, 1965

August 1965

On the crowded ship I finally met all the members of my company. During the month of hectic packing and training at Fort Benning, I barely knew who they were.

I was in Company B, 229th Assault Helicopter Battalion, one of two such battalions in the 1st Cav. Our company commander was Maj. John Fields, who would be replaced a couple of months after we got to Vietnam. Fields was well liked, but I would never know him well. My platoon leader was Capt. Robert Shaker, a black man, tall and skinny and very professional, which is to say a hardass. My squad leader and the man I would deal with the most was Capt. Dan Farris, a squarish, sturdy man with a built-in smile. He was military, but maintained his sanity nevertheless.

"Goddamn it, Connors, you just hit my eye with your elbow," growled Len Riker, a tall, skinny CW-2.

"Sorry, Len. This fucking Mae West almost had me then."

While we waited for Ensign Wall and Colonel Dogwell to inspect the lifeboat drill, Connors would wrestle endlessly with his preserver. If the wait lasted a half hour, that's how long he took to put it on. Besides being the company's IP, Pat Connors was our resident clown.

"There." He slipped his shoulder under the strap and straightened suddenly, only to fall against his friend Banjo Bates. "Gops. Sorry, miss."

"Watch it, Connors. I'm in no mood for your horsing around." Banjo folded his arms across the front of his Mae West, scowling, not look-ing at Connors. Bates almost always looked pissed off, except when Connors got to him, like he was doing now. Connors kept grinning at Banjo, not put off by stern looks.

"This is fucking crazy," Banjo said angrily. "Not only do I have to go through this stupid boat drill every other day to prove I can wear a life preserver I have to put up with a genuine asshole like you, Connors." He turned and had to smile at Connors's grinning face.

"At ease," said Shaker. Farris and the other squad leader called at ease. "Okay, roll call." Shaker read the names.

I still didn't know most of the men in my platoon by name. In the other platoon I knew Wendall, the camera nut, and his friend Barber, along with the model-maker, Captain Morris, and his buddy, CW-2 Decker.

"Daisy."

"Here." Capt. Don Daisy loved political arguments and played a lot of chess.

"Farris." Capt. Dan Farris. I liked him from the beginning.

"Gotler." CW-2 Frank Gotler, a soft-spoken man with a slight German accent who claimed to have flown for a short time in the Luftwaffe.

"Kaiser." CW-2 Bill Kaiser. He was short, with quick, darting eyes, and very aggressive. He took no shit from anybody, gambled constantly, and won most of the time. Had he been assigned to fly gunships instead of slicks I think he would have been a real killer.

"Leese." CW-3 Ron Leese. He was the highest-ranking warrant in our platoon, the rough equivalent of a captain. Leese was frail-looking, almost elfin, and very experienced in combat flying, having flown gliders in the Pacific and fighters in Korea. He often talked quietly with Gotler. He was new to the Cav. He had taken a leave of absence from his white-collar job to fly in Vietnam. Next to Connors, he was the best pilot in our company, certainly the most experienced in combat.

"Mason." WO-l Bob Mason. Me. Brand new to the unit, just out of flight school, with 250 hours of flying time. I was five ten, 140 pounds, and wore my brown hair daringly longer than the others. I had high cheekbones and squinty eyes. I was attempting to cope.

"Nate." Another CW-2. He smoked a pipe constantly and had a voice much deeper than his light build would lead you to expect.

"Resler." WO-l Gary Resler. Another guy new to the Cav and to army aviation.

"Riker."

"Here." After getting his eye poked by Connors's elbow, Riker's normally ruddy complexion had flushed to lobster. He was a serious man, almost humorless.

"Okay." Captain Shaker folded the roster sheet and put it under his arm and awaited inspection. Unlike the rest of us, he was not wearing a rumpled flight suit. He preferred to dress out in fatigues after the morning exercises, with shined boots. Being the platoon leader, he was serious about being a soldier first, a pilot second.

Ensign Wall of the navy and Col. Roger Dogwell of the army strolled around the corner from the other side of the ship as Shaker finished. Wall always seemed ready to burst into giggles. He was the only navy man on board and therefore in charge of the ship and equal in position to Dogwell. Dogwell was big and looked as if he would have liked to tie the ensign into some kind of handy knot. Shaker gave a loose salute, and the grinning ensign tapped his forehead with a finger. Dogwell scowled.

"Everybody here?" asked the ensign.

"Yes, Mr. Wall, everybody's here." Shaker's tone implied, Where do you think they are, walking in the park?

"Sir, where's Banjo?" Connors suddenly asked.

"I'm right here, you asshole." Banjo gave Connors a jab with an elbow.

"Oh, thank God, thank God."

"That's enough." Shaker turned and glared. Wall grinned. Dogwell looked positively vicious. The colonel said the only word I heard him say on the trip: "Pilots."

Leese sat next to me at breakfast.

"I've assigned you to fly a ship off the carrier when we get to Qui Nhon." He smiled.

"Really?" I smiled back weakly. I still wasn't at all confident about flying the Huey.

"Something wrong?" Leese asked. "You look kind of sick. This chow getting to you?"

"No, the chow's okay. I'm not too sure about my ability to fly a Huey off a carrier."

"It says here"-he produced a penciled note-"that you're checked out in Hueys. All four models." He looked back at me.

"Well, I have flown them, but it was mostly time under the hood at altitude. I had about ten hours of contact-flying instruction in them."

"How long have you been out of flight school?" I noticed smile wrinkles around his eyes as he looked at the front of his paper and then at the back.

"I graduated in the middle of May."

"So you don't feel too confident flying off the ship?"

"That's right."

"Okay." He put his notes on the plastic tablecloth next to his food tray. "I've just reassigned you to fly with me."

"Thanks. I'd rather not end my tour just getting off the boat."

"Oh, I'm sure you wouldn't have any trouble, but I need a copilot, and from what you say, you need the practice."

After breakfast I went back to my bunk to find my checklist. I was rusty on the start-up procedure. I got the checklist from my flight bag and walked back to the hangar deck to find a Huey to practice in.

The trail from our hatchway back through the interior of the ship to the mess hall was like a jungle path through piles of boxes, bags, coils, barrels, cases, and Hueys. Usually the trail was crowded, but I was alone between feeding shifts. In the middle of the deck I squeezed between two fuselages and pushed toward where a large light bulb glowed into the cockpit of a Huey. This was far enough away from the trail for

privacy. I didn't want the old salts to see me. Those guys could go through the entire start-up procedure about as quickly as I used my Zippo.

I opened the left cockpit door. Everything inside looked the same except for the armored pilots' seats. The armor meant that bullets were expected to be whizzing through the cockpit. Why had I argued so strongly with the elimination board?

I would be flying one of these into battle, something I had never considered as a kid daydreaming about saving flood victims, rescuing beautiful girls, or floating among the treetops picking apples. Not once in any of my fantasies did I have people shooting at me.

I sat in the first pilot's seat-the right seat-and looked around. Because our Hueys had no guns except the machine guns the crew chief and gunner used, they were called slicks. Our job would be to carry troopers into the landing zones. People on the ground would be trying to blast us out of the air. Unlike the gunship pilots, we would not be able to shoot back. I could not imagine how that was going to feel.

The armor added 350 pounds to the aircraft and displaced two grunts. I knocked it with my knuckles. The ceramic and steel laminations, built up to about half an inch thick, fit around and under the seat, made of aluminum frame with red nylon mesh. A sliding armored panel on the side of the seat next to the door pulled forward, protection for the torso but not for the head. We'd be issued chest armor when we got to Vietnam. It seemed pretty complete. I could not imagine bullets going anywhere but into the armor, because in the hangar deck of the Croatan no one was shooting.

I put my checklist down on top of one of the radios in the console between the two pilots' seats and twisted around to look at the cargo deck behind me. It was U-shaped because of the intrusion of the hellhole cover that enclosed the transmission and hydraulics directly under the mast. Our two door gunners would be stationed on either side of the hell-hole cover-in the pockets-firing M-60 machine guns attached to pylons. During our first two months, though, the machine guns would simply be strung from the top of the open doorways on elastic bungee cords. With the crew chief and gunner in the pockets, there was enough room for eight or ten troopers on the cargo deck.

I turned around to face front, and relaxed. While the Croatan rolled on the sea, I reviewed the cockpit check, and remembered Patience.

"Sitting around like this all day makes a feller want to go out and strangle somebody, just for fun," said Decker. Decker was an Arkansan from the other platoon. A dusty, disheveled guy whose sandy crew cut even looked rumpled, he was always with his close friend and fellow Arkansan Captain Morris. Together they swapped Southern aphorisms like "He was happier than a dead hog in the sunshine."

Morris was close to forty, and though he kidded with Decker, he looked worried. His thinning black hair was combed back with Brylcream, and his mouth was set thoughtfully, from years of concentration. He was a model-maker. He had acquired the plans of the Croatan from the boatswain and was spending most of his time building a detailed model of it. He even had the rust in the right places. When I got tired of watching the bow or reading or playing chess, I would often watch Morris at work. It was fascinating. His careful hands and peaceful face told me he liked doing what he was doing. But why the Croatan? Morris explained that the Croatan was the last of its kind. I liked and respected Morris. He seemed to be coping better than I during these endless days.

If I had a favorite time of day, it was the late afternoon, as the sun was setting. One day, as I stood in the bow watching the sun drop into the sea, I spotted something far ahead on the horizon-something on the ocean besides the Croatan. Contact with aliens. We are not alone.

A guy came up on the bow and propped his elbows on the steel ledge to brace his large binoculars. The thing out in front of us was dark and twisting, like a sea serpent.

"Looks like a tree branch," he said. "Something on it, too. Can't tell what, though." We waited. "Those things on it are seagulls," the guy announced to the growing crowd. "They're turned away from us. I don't think they know we're coming.

The Croatan was on a collision course with the twenty-foot branch and its two passengers.

I turned to look up to the bridge, off to the starboard side of the flight deck. A T-shirted man stood just outside the glass, pointing ahead.

"These boys aim to run those birds down," said Decker, who had just arrived. "Anybody'd do that's just as likely to rape your dog or scatter your garbage."

By then fifty men were crammed into the bow. I was at the point. The gulls still roosted, facing away from us. They had found the one place in the middle of the Pacific Ocean where they could stop and rest.

I leaned way over the edge to watch the collision. A perfect hit. The branch shattered in half, and the gulls crouched to leap, only to be sucked under the bow waves. They disappeared. Moments later, on the starboard side of the ship, about twenty feet behind the bow, first one and then the other bird scrambled out through the foam of the waves, shaking its head as its wings slapped the water.

Leese and I leaned against the starboard railing as we passed Bataan. Blue-gray mounds rose above the sea on the horizon. It was the only land we saw between California and Vietnam. Leese stared silently at the distant islands. He had landed a glider there.

"What was it like?" I asked.

"Real hot." He turned to me, smiling. "It was the worst feeling I've ever had. Those fucking gliders didn't land; they crashed. I thought that I was in control of those things during training, but when they were loaded up with men, they flew like fucking anvils." He swore only when he talked about gliders.

"You crashed?"

"Well, I walked away from it, so you could call it a landing. Some people got hurt on mine, killed on others. It was a terrible idea, gliders.... These Hueys at least will be able to fly back after we drop off the troops."

"So what did you do after the landing?"

"You were on your own. That was the job. You made the landing, and then you found your way to friendly lines if you could. Some didn't."

"Damn! So how'd you get into gliders?"

"My whole flight-school class was suddenly redesignated as glider-pilot candidates and shipped out. No reason. One day we were flying powered trainers and the next we were on our way to glider school."

"You flew in Korea, too?"

"Yeah. Tactical air squadron."

"Did you like that?"

"It was okay. As long as it has an engine, I like to fly it."

"Why did you quit your job to come into the Cav?"

"I dunno, exactly. I guess I just like to fly too much. In combat.

Combat flying is... a challenge. It scares the shit out of me every time

I do it, but I think about it a lot. Getting into the Cav was good for me,

I think. That desk looked more and more like a coffin every day. You know what I mean?"

I nodded, but I wasn't sure.

"Yeah. At least in combat, it's quick." He grinned.

"Are you betting on the anchor drop?" I asked Kaiser.

"Fuck no. That's strictly amateur crap," he replied as he puffed into some dice in the break room. "Anyone who'd waste a bet to guess the exact time we drop anchor is an asshole," he added.

"I put a buck on 9:37," said Connors.

"You're an asshole."

"No wonder my mother was so disappointed."

I had put in a buck, but I didn't tell Kaiser.

Within a day of landing, the ship became a hive of activity. We received unofficial encouragement to "find usable surplus equipment" from the boat for our new camp. Ensign Wall agreed that certain "musty old mattresses" could be removed from the ship, and he went on a tour with Colonel Dogwell to discuss what specifically we could remove to our Hueys.

While hundreds of men scavenged stuff from every compartment of the ship, others were in the process of getting the Hueys ready. The vinyl coating on the flight-deck Hueys was peeled off and thrown overboard. A few days of sea air would not hurt them. Boxes of rotor blades were brought up to the deck to be sorted out and attached to their original mountings, so the Hueys on the flight deck would be ready to fly almost immediately upon arrival at Qui Nhon. The rest, including the one Leese and I would fly, would be brought up on the hangar-deck elevator when the deck was clear. It was supposed to take three days to get the Hueys assembled, checked, loaded, and off the ship.

Gear from the scavenger hunt was stashed on the helicopters. Work crews of enlisted men, warrant officers, and lieutenants carried stacks of mattresses, coils of

rope, wire, yards of canvas, tools, and even lumber to the hangar deck and concealed the stuff in the Hueys. This wasn't junk we were taking. The mattresses were new, and so were the ropes and tools. Obviously we were cleaning up.

The ship was going back to the States after it dropped us off, and they could get more gear there. We were going to live in the middle of the jungle somewhere and felt that we needed all the help we could get. I more or less agreed with this attitude, but I did have some pangs when I saw just how much we were packing into the helicopters.

Before we landed, I got the boatswain's mate to make me a holster for my derringer. He wanted me to get him a couple dozen folding P-38 can openers from our C rations. During the confusion of this last day at sea, he came to our quarters and handed me the finished holster. A leather ring fitted over each shoulder, with an elastic band stretched between them across my back. The leather ring on my left shoulder had the holster sewn on near the bottom. I slipped the heavy derringer into the holster while the mate watched proudly. With the weight of the gun, the holster slid comfortably and invisibly under my arm. Maybe it would save my life; maybe I would use it to kill myself if I was captured. I really didn't know why I wanted it.

When I climbed out of the hatch and looked beyond the rail, there was something to see, distant and gray, but unmistakably land. Two hours later we were in Lang Mai Bay, south of Qui Nhon, ready to drop anchor. The marine helicopter carrier Iwo Jima was on our right, and ten military-contracted freighters from the Lykes line were on our left. The anchor hit the water at a little after 11 a.m. on the thirteenth of September. It had taken us thirty-one days to get here from Mobile. The rest of our division had left a week after we had and arrived a week before.

While our helicopters were being readied for flight, the pilots hung around above decks, watching the doings of the other carrier.

Marine pilots flew their big H-34s off the rolling deck of their carrier to the hazy coastline and then returned. The marines' concept of using helicopters was not the same as ours. We would live with our troops in the field. They returned to the safety and comfort of their ship each day. Knowing that made us feel tough.

The Iwo Jima was one of the ships that supported the recent battle of Chu Lai, which had occurred while we were en route. It was reported as the first regimental-

size battle since Korea, involving more than five thousand American ground troops, ARVNs, and navy artillery. The final score was seven hundred VC killed and fifty U.S. Marines. No one seemed to care how many ARVNs were killed.

"By mid-afternoon of the second day, all Viet Cong resistance had ceased. Boots, equipment and weapons were scattered haphazardly across the fields, and great black scars in the earth still smoked from napalm. The bodies of the enemy hung in pieces from trees and hedge-rows or lay charred in their tunnels and caves... ." The battle, according to Time, had "proved that by combining accurate intelligence reports, fast planning, and careful selection of where and when to fight, the U.S. [could] more than hold its own in Vietnam."

The combination of U.S. Marine and ARVN ground troops and heavy fighter and artillery support had produced big numbers of dead Vietnamese. Time reported more than 2000 VC killed, but there was a controversy as to how many of those killed were actually innocent villagers trapped in the crossfire.

"As far as I can see," said Decker, " anybody'd be dumb enough to hang around during them battles deserves what happens to him."

"Decker, they're saying that they found ten-year-old kids shot in those villages. Do you think they're VC?" objected Wendall.

"Maybe," answered Decker, "and maybe not. But this is war. Everybody gets hurt in a war. Hell, we can't go crying about the innocents that get killed. Innocents have been getting knocked off in wars since the beginning of time. If we want to win this thing for the Vietnamese we got to be ready to see it as it is: war, plain and simple and nasty."

"That's right," said Connors, "either we're fighting this war or we aren't. The Cav is here now, and those gooks are going to shit when they see us in action. We're beyond a reason to be here. We're here."

Captain Sherman and John Hall, a warrant from our advance party, had brought bags of mail that had accumulated while we were en route. I spent a long time reading the dozen or so letters Patience sent. Of those, I record this:

[August 25]

"I miss you so much my darling dear husband. I took a nap on Suzi's bed today and kept imagining that you were there next to me trying to comfort me (as if we'd had

one of our dumb fights). I'm going to write Lois today to see if Jayne can come down here to Naples. I wish you could come. I bet it's pretty dull on the ship. I'M
MORE EXCITING! COME TO THE CASBAH WITH ME!!

Bobby, I miss you so much. I've been trying to be busy. Your dad stopped by and we got your film back from the Panama Canal-shall I send you the pictures or keep them? Only one was a little blurry. I like the one of you. You look more tanned already. After Dad left I pushed the stroller (AND JACK!) up to the Sunshine for some Coppertone and then down to the beach for a short swim. Now it's two in the afternoon-thunderstorming outside and nothing to do except remember how we used to take showers together, and play Monopoly and kiss and make love and hold each other. I miss you so much I could die, but I won't, as long as you come back. And PLEASE HURRY! I wish it were next August.

Jack still misses you, I can tell-he is very attracted to men and he says " Da-da" when he's very excited and happy. I love you! VERY
MUCH!

It is so insane to me that such a short while ago we were living together, fooling around, laughing over Jack and the kitty. It's inconceivable that you're gone, but you obviously are. Please write me a lot. You know those old war flicks where the guy's sitting in a foxhole up to his ankles in water while the mortars fall all around, writing a letter to his girl on toilet paper-well that's what I expect!

Jack just said "Down" when he wanted to get out of his high chair! Last night at supper the kitty was meowing under his chair and he looked down at her and said "Meow!"

I love to write you. It makes me feel more secure as well as giving me something to do. But I better end this.

I LOVE YOU MADLY & THE MOST,
Patience

"Well, we're going right into the middle of it, men," Major Fields announced. We were gathered in the break room for a briefing, and Fields pointed to the map he had taped on the bulkhead. "Onr camp is just two miles north of this village." He pointed.

"It's the village of An Khe, about halfway between Qui Nhon and Pleiku on this hundred-mile east-west stretch of road called Route 19. This whole area"-he gestured at the map-"is considered VC territory. The highway was just opened by the ARVNs in July. The Cav will be the first unit to locate right in the middle of VC-land, and the idea is to be right there in the middle of 'em, to clean 'em out of here, pronto." He smiled as his fingers tapped some papers on the table. "So when you fly in, your route will be the road. And stay high. All these little villages you'll see on your way through the south end of the valley are VC-controlled, and some ships have reported sniper fire up at a thousand feet. About forty miles inland you'll come to this pass, the An Khe pass, which marks the end of the valley and the beginning of the highlands. The division's base camp is here, about ten miles beyond the pass in the high ground. They say we'll have cool sleeping weather there. Our division takes up a big piece of real estate. It's still being cleared. The heliport is 3000 by 4000 feet, and nearly twenty thousand men are camped all around that." Fields took a sip of coffee. "When you get out there, you'll be briefed in detail about the camp, our company area, and like that. I haven't seen the place myself yet.

"Our company's radio call sign will be 'Preacher.' " Fields picked up a sheet of paper from his stack that had FM, UHF, and VHF written on it, with the appropriate frequencies printed carefully next to them. "Copy these numbers down. They'll change when you get there, but this is what you should have on your radios for the flight in." We hunched over our pocket notebooks and recorded the information.

"Now, about all this crap that's being stuffed on the aircraft." Fields paused as the men laughed knowingly. "I don't know what exactly you've put in them, and I don't want to know, either." He smiled, shaking his head. "But I'm here to tell you that the navy-Ensign Wall-has complained that some supplies, unauthorized supplies, are missing. Now, I don't think anyone in our company would be so greedy as to steal from this ship, but I do have to pass the complaint along." The major beamed at his mischievous boys. "So, I don't have much more to say except that we'll be leaving at twenty-minute intervals starting today. The last Huey should be off the Croatan in two days. You've got your ship assignments, your maps, and your radio frequencies. Are there any questions?"

"Yessir," Banjo called out. "Does the advance party have our tents set up yet?" Laughter.

"Yeah, I'm sure they do, Banjo. Complete with floors, featherbeds, and private baths."

By eleven the next morning, Leese and I and the crew chief, SP-5 Don Reacher, were ready to go. Reacher had worked on the assembly team to get our Huey ready. Leese and I had done a very careful preflight. Underneath some shabby canvas tarps on the cargo deck were stacked a dozen bulky mattresses and twenty thick pine boards. Leese had decided to make the takeoff, which pleased me.

Connors and Banjo were running up their ship about seventy-five feet away. It was at full rpm, and I could see the disk tilt back and forth as Connors checked the controls. I stood at the nose of our Huey and watched. The first breeze came to me as Connors pulled in the collective. The disk coned as it began to pull the ship off the deck. He waited a few moments in a five-foot hover, and the full blast of the rotor wash hit me with the sweet, kerosene smell of warm turbine exhaust. He nosed over and left the carrier on his way to the airfield at Qui Nhon, to top off his tank. After thirty-two days of waiting, we were finally getting off the ship. Leese and I were next. I felt the breast pocket of my fatigues for my notebook and cigarettes. My army .45 was secure in its black leather holster over my concealed derringer. I gave myself the now automatic check down the front of my uniform. My belt buckle was covered with green tape. My fatigue pants were so baggy they almost concealed my combat boots. It felt strange to be dressed this way for flying. We'd always worn flight suits before.

Leese had been talking to someone at the edge of the flight deck while Connors took off. He walked toward the Huey. "Let's go."

I opened the left door, put my foot on the skid, and leaned over to grab the far edge of the armored chair. Leese was getting in on the other side, and my cyclic stick moved as he bumped his with his leg. I slid my leg between the cyclic and the front of the seat and lowered myself onto the nylon mesh. Reacher stood outside next to me and handed me the shoulder straps and radio cord from behind the high-backed seat. I clicked the lever over to anchor the shoulder straps to the wide lap belt. Another crew chief from the ship behind us helped Leese with his straps. Strapped in, Leese released the inertial reel lock so that he could lean forward to do the cockpit check. Starting at the bottom of the center console beside his left foot, he moved his

hand over the many switches and circuit breakers, checking their positions. His hand moved over the top of the console between us and checked that the radios were off. I followed him and clicked in the proper frequencies. I pulled on my brand-new leather flying gloves. They would last two weeks in this climate. Leese pushed in the igniter circuit breaker on the overhead console and announced, "Okay, we're ready to crank."

We slipped our flight helmets on. I grabbed the base of mine on both sides to spread it slightly and pulled it over my head. I forgot to pull the earphones back with the outside strings, so one of them lodged crookedly against my left ear. I pulled the string loop on that side to pull the rubber cup away and reseat it. The phones were dead until Leese flipped the master switch. He squeezed the radio trigger switch on his cyclic to the first click and said through my phones, "Ready?" I did a thumbs-up. He turned to look out his door window, to make sure someone was posted there with a fire extinguisher. Someone was. He nodded, and the man raised the red bottle to the ready. Leese rolled the throttle open to the indent starting position and squeezed the trigger switch on his collective. The electric starter motor whined shrilly. The rotors accelerated slowly. I was always amazed that any electric motor could turn the engine, transmission, and those big rotor blades. The rotor blades blinked. A loud hissing noise, audible over the moan of the starter, meant that the fire had caught in the turbine. Leese watched the exhaust-gas temperature gauge (EGT) carefully. The needle rushed past the red line, and the rotors spun to a blur. The EGT stayed pegged in the danger zone as usual for a couple of seconds before it moved back into the green, operating range. Leese did a thumbs-up to the watching fireman. The danger of a hot start had passed. The Huey had snapped into smooth operation after more than a month of storage.

I tapped all the gauges on my side of the instrument panel. Everything was in the green. "Everything okay back there?" Leese called to Reacher on the intercom.

"Yes, sir, everything is secure." We carried no gunner on this trip.

The deck rolled while the Croatan lay at anchor. Leese opened the throttle to the operating position and briefly checked the blurry edge of the rotor disk to see that it moved correctly as he pushed the cyclic around. As he slowly pulled the collective up, the nose of the Huey characteristically rose first, and he corrected for drift

inclinations. When the helicopter was stable, he raised the collective and pulled us above the moving deck.

I looked out at the circle of spectators and saw their clothes flapping in our gale. Leese hovered for a few seconds at six feet, checking the gauges one last time before he nosed the ship forward with an imperceptible push of the cyclic. I watched the edge of the flight deck move under us through the chin bubble at my feet. The sea churned below us. We were on our way.

Chapter Three
Setting Up Camp

> In the final analysis the final outcome of the war will be decided by the sustained fighting of the ground forces, by the fighting at close quarters on battlefields, by the political consciousness of the men, by their courage and spirit of sacrifice.
>
> -Lin Piao, September 1965

September 1965

We landed at Qui Nhon to have our tank topped off to its 1200-pound, 200-gallon capacity before the flight to An Khe. Beneath the overcast sky the air was hot and moist. The smell of human waste drifted from the sand dunes beyond the concertina wire that bordered the runway, apparently part of the city's latrine. I saw people squatting among the dunes and shreds of paper drifting in the breeze. We stared like tourists at the people we had come to save. A young boy wiped himself with a bare hand and then licked same.

"Gawd." Leese shook his head and turned away.

Leese flew. I followed the map, keeping track of our position so I could radio in our coordinates if we went down. The VC-controlled valley between Qui Nhon and the An Khe pass was a vast swamp of rice paddies. The road we were following was considered partially safe. Leese climbed up to the cloud ceiling at 3000 feet.

The map was dotted with names like An Dinh, Luat Chanh, Dai Tio, My Ngoc, and a hundred more, crowded around the outskirts of Qui Nhon. The valley stretched

twenty miles north to Bong Son and stopped just a kilometer (or "klick") south of us at the foothills. Fingers of high ground pushed nearer from the south along the road. These ridges were about 1500 feet high and completely covered with lush jungle. Occasionally I saw clearings on the sides of the hills where banana trees grew. While Leese flew, I conjured up grinning VC who sighted along the barrels of their guns as they stood concealed under the green canopy. It suddenly became obvious to me that I was completely exposed to any fire that came from the front. Chest protectors would be nice. Total armor with a slit to see through would be better. Flying back to the ship would be even smarter. I looked over at Leese. He smiled. The pass loomed ahead.

"Here, you take it for a while."

"I got it."

Below us the narrow road twisted upon itself as it began to climb up through the steep foothills. As the ground rose toward us, I could not resist pulling a little pitch. Two hundred feet higher and we flew through occasional wisps of cloud. The world disappeared for a few seconds each time.

At the top of the pass the ground rose to within 800 feet of us. The empty road ran through thick jungle. A tall hill called Hong Kong Hill, ten miles ahead, marked our camp.

"A lot of nice places to hide down there," I said.

"I'll say," Leese said quietly as he watched the ground. From our vantage point Vietnam looked very big and very green with its thick covering of jungle. It looked like a great place to have a guerrilla war, if you were going to be the guerrilla. "I'll say," Leese repeated.

The overcast was breaking up ahead, and the jungle glowed green between dark shadows formed on the ground. Leese reached over to click the radio to our company frequency. I felt the cyclic move slightly as he squeezed the radio trigger. "Preacher base, Preacher eight-seven-niner." Our ship's tail number.

"Roger, Preacher eight-seven-niner. Go ahead."

"Preacher eight-seven-niner at the pass. Where do we park?"

"Preacher eight-seven-niner, call Golf Course control and they'll clear you to land at our parking area. We're located at the south end of the field on row three. We'll send someone to pick you up. You copy?"

"Roger, Preacher base. Eight-seven-niner out."

As the land sank toward An Khe, I reduced the collective and let the ship descend slowly. Dead ahead of us, just north of the road, was Hong Kong Hill, the western border of Camp Radcliff. The Golf Course, the heliport cleared of all its trees, stood out against the green.

"Golf Course control, Preacher eight-seven- niner, five miles east for landing instructions."

"Roger, Preacher eight-seven- niner. You are cleared for a straight-in approach to the south on row three. Follow your ground guides."

The skinny Song Ba River ran beside the eastern perimeter of the camp. Two miles to the south it grew to a hundred yards wide near the village of An Khe. Near the river, between the village and the camp, was a small airstrip built by the French. The Cav's fixed-wing aircraft were using it now.

Leese rogered the instructions from Golf Course control, and I swung off to the right so I could loop around and come back toward the field on a southerly heading, for a straight-in approach.

"Keep it high until we get closer," said Leese.

"Okay."

The sun shone brightly as we cruised over the jungle north of camp and turned south to line up on row three. I started my descent about a mile away and a thousand feet high. Our advance party had done a big job. The Golf Course was dotted with thousands of stumps. Around it the trees stood thickly.

"Preacher eight-seven-niner, short final."

"Eight-seven-niner, cleared to land."

I reduced the pitch and pulled back on the cyclic to set up my approach flare. The top of Hong Kong Hill rose above the horizon on our right as I descended below it. As we got closer, the Golf Course looked very rough.

"Man, look at all the stumps," I said.

"Incredible."

Six straight, parallel rows of helicopters were divided by vehicle tracks that jogged through the mud among ravines and stumps. Olive-drab tents, trucks, water trailers, Jeeps, and people littered the cleared area past the south end of the Golf Course, where we would be living.

At 500 feet I crossed a swath cut through the trees that formed the northern perimeter of the camp. The edge of the Golf Course was still 500 feet ahead. Among the trees below I saw hundreds of pup tents. Thousands of our troopers were camped along the meandering perimeter, guarding the rest of us.

I flared steeply at 200 feet to slow the Huey for the landing. Just above the top of my instrument panel, at the south end of the Golf Course, I saw a man waving his arms as he stood on a Jeep.

"See him?"

"Got 'im," I said.

I came to a high hover in the center of the rough dirt row. I was nervous about hitting the tail rotor on the rough ground. The man who had waved us in now motioned us over to a parking slot between two other ships. My inexperience was showing. I overcontrolled the sensitive tail-rotor pedals and waggled toward the slot.

"Takes a while to get used to the tail-rotor control in a Huey," said Leese.

Six weeks ago I had had no trouble with the tail-rotor pedals. Now I was handling them like a student.

"Why am I having trouble now?" I complained.

"It's common, Bob. You just need some flying time to get the feel of the ship. There's no substitute for experience, you know." Leese used his floor switch to talk to me so he wouldn't have to touch the cyclic while I hovered.

I floated over a very large stump and nosed into the slot. A reverse slope rose toward the tail. As I pulled the cyclic back to stop, I could imagine the spinning tail rotor smashing into the dirt. The Huey hovers tail low anyway. I was too cautious. I let the ship down so gently that a gust picked us back up. I overcompensated and we dropped rapidly. I overcompensated for that and we rose abruptly.

"Relax," said Leese. "You're doing fine."

That's what an instructor says to a nervous student. I felt the heat of embarrassment rise in my cheeks.

First the heel of the left skid touched ground lightly, followed by the heel of the right skid, not lightly, and then the ship plopped forward ungracefully and settled flat on the skids.

"A little work on your last three feet is all you need," said Leese. "Your air work and the approach were top notch."

The ground guide drew his hand across his throat, signaling me to shut down the ship.

And so I made my first landing on Vietnamese soil.

We threw our flight bags in the back of the Jeep. Reacher stayed behind to supervise the unloading of the booty from the Croatan. As Leese and I rode 500 yards along the waffle-tracked ruts to our company's area, I saw the five sky cranes I had heard so much about. Even by helicopter standards they were ungainly-looking. They were skeleton-framed helicopters designed to lift 20,000 pounds. Removable, preloaded, mobile-home-size pods fitted neatly under them, including a completely equipped emergency-surgery room. And they could sling-load big artillery pieces, as well as any aircraft the army owned, including the twin-rotor Chinook, which usually retrieved the downed Hueys.

"Welcome to Camp Radcliff," said Captain Owens, the operations officer. He had come out of the operations tent, one of our two general-purpose (GP) tents (these tents measured 20 by 40 feet). He and CW-3 White, the other OPS officer, lived in the back.

"Where'd they get the name Radcliff?" asked Leese.

"A major in the advance party who got killed at the Mang Yang pass," Owens said.

"Where's that?" I asked.

"Up the road about twenty more miles," said Owens. His olive-drab T-shirt was dark from sweat. "On the way to Pleiku," he added. He pulled his dark-stained cap off and pulled the bottom of his shirt up to his face. Sweat dripped out of his hair and beaded across his beard stubble. "His ship got shot down from three thousand feet over the pass by a fifty-caliber machine gun. Tracers picked him out and followed him all the way to the ground."

"So, how is it around here?" asked Leese, as he struggled with his flight bag, pulling it out of the back of the Jeep. It weighed as much as he did.

"Very confused." Owens leaned up against the front fender, hat in hand. "Every night there's a bunch of firefights on our perimeter. A lot of it's our own troops shooting at our patrols coming back to the line." He turned around to face north. "Up there last night"-he pointed- "five guys in a patrol were killed trying to get back in. My advice to you is not to walk around the camp at night. You're liable to get blown

away by nervous grunts. I don't blame them, though; some of the action is VC, too. There's no physical perimeter line around a lot of the camp, so the boundaries aren't clear to everybody. The guards get confused and shoot at anything that moves or makes a noise." Owens laughed suddenly as he replaced his cap. "Couple of nights ago, they must've put a hundred rounds into a water buffalo."

"Where do we sleep?" asked Leese.

"You have to set up a pup tent for the time being. Our platoon tents aren't here yet. Probably still on some boat somewhere in a Conex container. The major said to set up on this side of that GP there." Owens pointed to the other GP tent, a hundred feet past his. "Good luck," he said.

That night while rain tapped on my tent I wrote Patience a letter by candlelight. I told her how painful it was to be so far away, how I missed her and Jack, how much I loved her. Small-arms fire popped and crackled in the darkness. I had talked to a guy at Belvoir who had told me how great his Vietnam tour had been. He had a villa overlooking the ocean, willing hooch maids, casinos, and great buys at the PX. He had been stationed with a group of advisers somewhere along the coast, where he flew officials around from one Special Forces camp to another. I thought of him and cursed my luck.

Everybody was busy working in the company area the next morning. I was leaning against a stack of mattresses that I was about to lay out in the sun when a Jeep bounced out of the slop of the perimeter road. A colonel got out. After a brief word with Major Fields, he turned to us.

"We have heard reports that some mattresses and other supplies were taken off the Croatan." He walked closer to me and the mattresses. "Now, I know that no one from the 229th would do this, but you know how the navy is. Complain, complain, complain. So I've got to officially ask you men if you have seen any of these missing mattresses and ropes and lumber and stuff from that ship."

I pushed myself away from the stack of hot merchandise. He looked at us and smiled warmly. His eyes did not so much as glance at the stack. He pinned his look on Connors.

"No, sir," said Connors. "I sure haven't seen anything like that. I'd sure like to have one of those mattresses, too."

"I'm sure you would, son," said the colonel, nodding kindly. "Anybody else know anything about this missing gear from the Croatan?" the colonel said as he walked toward the GP tent. Nate, standing next to the canvas doorway, said, "No, sir. Haven't seen anything like you're talking about around here." A huge pile of ropes lay nearby.

"Not a thing, sir," said Riker, leaning against a stack of lumber.

"Nothing, sir," said Kaiser.

Twenty pairs of eyes sincerely, innocently denied that all this stuff lying in full view existed.

"Well, thank you, men, for your time and your cooperation." The colonel smiled and turned to Fields, who walked him back to his Jeep.

While the sun dried our gear, Fields called us together for a briefing. The map tripod was set up in front of the operations tent. Fields was wearing a set of the new jungle fatigues and boots that the advance party had picked up for him. The rest of us were waiting for them to be issued. Jungle fatigues fitted loosely. The top wasn't tucked in; it was more like a safari jacket. The boots were canvas-topped and vented to keep your feet dry.

"Okay, men, now that you are all here, this is what's happening." Fields held his folding pointer collapsed in front of him. "All that activity you saw out on the Golf Course yesterday was the 227th"-our sister assault-helicopter battalion-"going out to help the 101st." He unfolded the pointer and then snapped it shut again. "They got the Airborne out of a bind and lost some ships and people doing it. I don't have accurate figures yet." (Four ships shot down, one crew lost, it turned out.) He opened his pointer and turned to the tripod. "The reason for this briefing is to give you the lay of the camp and what we're going to be doing for the next couple of weeks." He pointed to a drawing of the camp on the first page of the big pad. "Our four companies are grouped here, below the southeast corner of the Golf Course." He described the camp layout and then stopped and tore off the page, revealing another drawing. "This is a plan for Bravo Company's area." He pointed. "Now, notice that this road here on the map is not on the ground over there." He pointed toward the medical tent that marked the division between us and Charlie Company, nicknamed

the Snakes. "Nor is this ditch, or this bunker, nor any of these tents. Putting these things in place on the ground will be our job. The only flying will be admin flights and courier missions. We must finish setting up camp before we start work. Everyone will work. That means all officers and warrant officers as well as NCOs and enlisted. There will be police call every morning and plenty of work details every day. Furthermore, some of you will have to go out on the Golf Course and chop out the stumps." Fields paused as some of us turned around to look at the 275-acre heliport and the thousands of stumps.

"You mean, the engineers aren't going to push them things out?" said Decker.

"That's right." We turned around as Fields spoke. "The engineers aren't being used, because we don't want to expose the dirt. When we get into the dry season, the dust will be fierce around here." We looked back around to the muddy trails and ravines. It didn't look as though it could be much worse than it was.

"What do we do with the stumps after we dig them out?" Decker was very interested in the stump operation.

"When we get enough of them loose, the plan is to haul them away with the Hueys. That's down the road. In the meantime, I need a detail to fill sandbags for the bunkers, a detail to cut the road, a detail to dig the ditches, and a detail to put in phone lines."

Somehow the glamour of being an army aviator eluded me. I dug ditches along the company road. Resler, Banjo, Connors, Nate, Riker, and Kaiser dug, too.

We were worrying out a small stump in the middle of the road when a little green snake wriggled out of the roots.

"Hey! A snake," yelled Banjo.

"Hey yeah," said Connors, "let's catch it."

The snake was trying to get back into the protection of the roots. Armed with a variety of sticks, shovels, axes, and other probing instruments, we rolled the stump away and surrounded the snake.

"Is it poisonous?" asked Nate.

"Naw," said Connors. "It's a green snake. I've seen them a hundred times back home." Connors jumped abruptly as the snake, which he was trying to pin with his stick, struck fiercely. "Damn. I've never seen them do that before."

"Shit, Connors. You going to let a green snake scare you?" laughed Banjo. He squatted down with a stick to try his luck.

Captain Farris came to see what the commotion was all about. "Hey, don't touch that snake," he yelled. "That's a bamboo viper. Deadly poisonous!"

The circle of snake hunters widened quickly.

"Poisonous?" Banjo turned and glared at Connors. "Shit, Connors, I was just about to grab that little fucker. Green snake, my ass!"

"It's green, ain't it?" yelled Connors.

"Yeah," said Farris. "It's a green bamboo viper." Farris took a shovel from Resler and quickly pushed the blade through the snake and firmly into the ground. The two halves twitched and wriggled in the dirt. Its mouth yawned wide in its death throes.

"Just remember," said Farris, "of the thirty-three kinds of snakes over here, thirty-one are poisonous."

"How do we tell them apart?" asked Resler.

"I think that with those ratios, you could afford to come to a prejudicial, sweeping generalization-like, kill them all." Farris turned and left.

The dirt from the ditches was shoveled into sandbags. Our squad was divided. Five of us filled the bags while the other half carried the sixty-pound sacks a hundred feet to the site of our first bunker.

We laid a foundation of sandbags measuring fifteen feet square with one opening for the door, deciding after much debate that the walls only needed to be one bag thick. Once the foundation was laid, more guys from the platoon joined us to speed up the work. By late afternoon we had the walls six feet high.

Another work detail had been given the task of getting large trees to serve as the rafters for the roof. These were smoothed and trimmed to size with axes. Just before evening chow, we had them set in place across the top of the sandbags.

"Look at the shit in this dip water." Captain Morris, the mess officer, scowled at the garbage can of steaming water. Kerosene immersion heaters were supposed to keep the water boiling to sterilize our mess gear. As the first few men walked past and dipped their gear, the water began to cool and collect a thin film of grease and assorted debris. Morris stomped angrily into the mess tent, presumably to confront the mess sergeant.

Decker eyed the water disdainfully. "This damn water is rank enough to bury," he said loudly.

"Yeah," said Connors from behind me in the chow line, "they should bury it in the same pit they throw whatever else died in there." He nodded toward the mess tent.

"That's our chow you smell," said Banjo.

"I'm gonna puke." Connors made a face and grabbed his stomach. "What is that shit? Why can't we eat C rations?"

"Gainesburgers," said Banjo. We had named the army's canned ground-beef patties, served in gravy, after the dog food. The preserving process had converted real meat into an unidentifiable, chewy, dry substance soaked in grease.

The line moved past the front of the mess tent. Into the two halves of my mess kit the servers poured, placed and plopped a variety of foods:

"Gainesburgers," instant potatoes, boiled cabbage, stewed corn, and circles of sliced canned bread. I walked back to the bunker to join my comrades as they ate sitting on a pile of sandbags.

"Is there going to be beer tonight?" Connors asked.

"Tomorrow. I'm going to Qui Nhon to pick up a shipload," said Nate.

"How come you get the fun details?" Connors complained.

"Luck, skill, experience, ass-kissing. You know," quipped Nate. He had finished eating and was now beginning the ritual of the pipe.

"Think that bunker will take a direct hit?" Resler asked me.

"I don't think so. But I guess that depends on how thick we made the roof."

"How thick are we gonna make it, Captain Farris?" Resler turned to our squad leader.

"I think Captain Shaker wants us to make the roof two bags thick," Farris answered as he balanced the two halves of his mess kit on his knees.

"Will that take a direct hit?"

"Naw," said Farris.

Before noon the next day we had laid sheets of perforated steel planking (PSP), normally used for roads and runways, across the tree rafters, and laid a roof two bags thick across them. It sagged a little in the middle, but you could walk around inside it

if you bent your head down. From outside it looked massive and sturdy indeed, a pattern for the other three.

After lunch we worked for three hours filling more sandbags when PFC Berne, a runner from operations, ran up to us. He looked concerned.

"Mr. Connors, you and Banjo are supposed to get in the air right away!"

"What's up?" Connors threw his shovel down.

"Nate got shot down on the beer run."

"C'mon, Banjo." Connors ran toward the operations tent. Resler and Riker and Leese and I watched them go.

In the midst of the digging and building, I had forgotten that there were people outside who did not want us here.

In the pale moonlight that night, we celebrated the beer run. Four pilots, each holding an unopened can of beer, marched around the bunker. With flourishes and chants of "Oh noble leader," they approached Fields, who sat laughing in a lawn chair. They put the beer on the bunker and backed away, having delivered the fruits of the mission. Those four lonely cans were all that survived of the 100 cases that Nate and Kaiser had picked up in Qui Nhon.

The Snakes loaned us enough beer for the party. We sat on and around the bunker while Nate and Connors told the story.

"I was flying at two thousand feet with Kaiser when they got us," said Nate. "I didn't see where it came from, but we heard them hit. Two rounds severed the fuel line near the engine, and a few seconds later it got real quiet."

"Quiet's not the word for it," Kaiser interrupted. "I could hear my heart beating."

"This was my first real autorotation. I bottomed the pitch and looked for a place to land. The ton of beer in the back made the trip down real fast, but I made it okay."

"Yeah," said Kaiser, "he landed okay. He put the skids two feet into the fucking ground. Landed okay, my ass."

"So, I hit a little hard. I didn't bend anything," said Nate.

"I don't care if you bent anything; I'm glad you're all still alive," said Fields, smiling. "What happened then?"

"Well, we're on the ground in grass up to our ass looking at the tree lines. Kaiser called for help on the emergency channel when we were hit. The crew chief and gunner stayed at their guns and covered us." Nate held his lighted pipe in one hand

while his other hand held his elbow. His back arched as he talked, and he periodically used the pipe as a pointer to emphasize a fact. "We musta landed beyond the VC, because there was no more shooting. About two minutes after we landed, a slick from the Snakes came over, checked us on the radio to make sure it was clear, and came in to get us. We stripped the radios and brought them and the machine gun with us. Kaiser wanted to bring some beer out, but the Snake ship wouldn't wait. As soon as our asses touched the deck, they were gone." Nate's pipe pointed up. "So while we were being picked up by the Snakes, Major Fields and Connors and Banjo came out to join us along with a gunship. We met them on the way in and circled back out. From the time we left our ship to the time we got back it was about a half hour." Nate gestured toward Connors.

"My turn?" Connors grinned. "Well, when we got to the scene, the gooks had been busy. I could see them scrambling off into the woods as we came up. The gunship dove down after them, but it was too late. When the gunship said it was clear, we came in." Connors stopped to laugh with Nate over a private joke. "Look, I want you to realize that the grass in that clearing was real deep." Connors took a drink of beer. "Like I said, the gooks had been busy. They had tried to sabotage the ship, I guess, because they had spent the time slashing the seats to ribbons, smearing shit on the instruments, piling dirt into the cockpit, and cramming sticks down the hell hole. Bright guys, these Vietnamese. They did get one thing right, though. They had taken every single one of those cases of beer off with them. Now, that's terrorism."

"But-" Nate added, with raised eyebrows.

"But they missed one case. One case had dropped into the grass, and nobody knew where it was until I landed that six-thousand-pound machine right on top of it." Fields was practically crying, he was laughing so hard. "But," Connors continued, "I did manage to spare some of those cans." Connors pointed to the four Budweisers on the bunker. We cheered. Connors raised one of the cans up high and proclaimed, "To the Preachers. May we have more beer and less action."

The party broke up early when the sky darkened and the first drops of rain fell. As the storm clouds erased the moon, I remembered that I had yet to improve the drainage trench around my tent.

"Man, if a snake got in here with me tonight, I don't know whether I would just lie here and let him bite me or jump out into this fucking rain." Resler's voice was muffled through his tent and mine.

"Snake?" I heard Leese call out. He was on the other side of Resler. The rain pounded so hard it sounded like tearing fabric. My flaps were tightly closed, and I watched the rivulets of water run along the bottom edge of the canvas at the back of the tent. Where the water dripped onto my dirt floor, I scraped a trench with my pocket knife to let it drain out.

I wrote my nightly letter to Patience. I told her about my tent, not flying, the constant racket from the perimeter, and a sergeant who had been bitten by a snake. He had not checked his bedroll before he got in. Luckily we had antivenom, which was rumored to be as painful as the bite.

Above the roar of the rain I could hear the whump of mortars and artillery from nearby positions. Small-arms fire crackled from all directions. I could imagine what it would be like to be on perimeter guard duty on a night like this.

Something moved under the covers. I froze. I felt something cold squirm against my calf. Snake? What should I do? If I yelled or moved, he would bite. While the rain pounded the canvas, I sweated in the stifling air. When it crawled onto my knee, I realized what it was. I pulled the covers back, and a giant brown insect flew into the side of the tent.

"Snake! Snake!" Connors's voice was muffled but loud in the storm. I pushed my head outside and pointed my flashlight toward his tent. It was gone. He and his tent spent the rest of the night in the GP.

I sat with my ass inside the tent to put my boots on. The storm had stopped during the night. The morning was bright, even pretty. Morris and Decker were shaving behind the GP, using their steel helmets as basins. I laced my pant legs into my boots and got up shirtless to walk to the piss tube. The rain had even washed some of the ammonia smell away from the area around the empty rocket case stuck into the ground. These piss tubes were strategically located around the company area. They worked pretty well until they filled up. The soil would absorb only so much. When they were full, the bad smell helped us find them at night without a flashlight.

I was thinking about going back to my tent to shave before breakfast when I noticed the crowd around the bunker.

"I cannot fucking believe it." Shaker walked back and forth in the middle of the crowd. "I asked you to build a goddamn bunker. A bunker. Look at what I get. I get a fucking burlap-covered mud pile. That's what I get!"

The bunker had collapsed. Trees and PSP lay at odd angles, with sodden sandbags drooping among them. Nothing rose more than two feet high in the jumbled wreckage.

"Goddamn it." Shaker stalked away.

"Maybe we should've made the walls thicker," Resler said.

Almost everyone in the company sweated in heavy physical labor every day. New tents were set up. Their guy wires blocked our makeshift trails. The company road was finished. We were trenching around tents and hacking and digging the stumps on the Golf Course. The company's bunker project had been abandoned. I still lived in the pup tent, but I had reduced the chance of snakes crawling into my bed roll by squeezing a cot into the tent and sleeping at the peak. It worked. Police call continued every morning, even though there was nothing to pick up except twigs. Fresh gray dirt was scattered everywhere as evidence of our work.

A select few of our company flew administration flights to neighboring units in Pleiku, 50 miles west; Qui Nhon; and even Saigon, 260 miles south. Our commanders and their friends got a chance to secure important information about building bunkers and such, to do a little scouting, to go on beer runs, and to get laid.

When the rest of us finished working at the end of the day, we sponged ourselves clean with water from the water trailer, using our combat helmets as washbasins. The administrators took showers at the Special Forces camps they visited.

Feeling that I had been sold into slavery, I was honored when Shaker told me to come with him on an admin flight to Pleiku. I packed a clean set of clothes and my dop kit. The Special Forces adviser com

pound in Pleiku had showers. I would also get a chance to fly for the first time in almost two weeks.

Being alone with Shaker was more like being alone. During the entire flight over and back, he said not a word to me. I guessed that he was checking me out, but if so, he was doing it in silence.

The adviser compound was great. I walked on sidewalks, took a shower, put some change through a slot machine, and bought some junk, including a small camera, at the PX.

"You should've waited and bought yourself a good camera," Wendall examined my 16mm Minolta back at our company area. "A good camera, like a Nikon F"

"Yeah, maybe," I said, feeling bad that I had bought the thing. "I'll just keep it around for quick shots. I'm going to get a good camera as soon as we get some at the PX-when we get a

"Let me go with you when you do," said Wendall. "I know everything about every camera ever made."

The day after the flight to Pleiku, I got my first chance to meet some Vietnamese. Hundreds of them.

"We're clearing a field here"-Shaker pointed to a spot outside the northern perimeter on the map in the operations tent-"for a refueling depot. Vietnamese labor. They started a couple of days ago, and it's our turn to supply a overseer. That's you, Mason."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Just watch 'em. They've got a Vietnamese boss who knows the details. You're there to make sure they're working and to watch for tricks."

"Tricks?"

"Yeah. They've been finding trimmed poles pointing right at our mortar and machine-gun positions. Obviously some of the people in the work crew are VC."

Truckloads of Vietnamese had already arrived at the clearing when I got there. I rode in a Jeep driven by Sergeant Meyers. Four large deuce-and-a-half trucks were crammed with 150 men, women, and children-refugees, I was told, who were glad to have the opportunity to earn money. The men were paid a hundred piasters a day and the women and children seventy-five. (A piaster was worth roughly a penny.) When Meyers and I pulled up, the truck drivers allowed the workers to get out.

I had no idea what to do next, but their boss did. Black pajamas and conical hats piled out of the trucks and hurried purposefully off in all directions while the boss yelled orders. A group of adolescents lingered near one truck, and the boss ran over and kicked one of them in the ass. The boss was of sergeant quality. In less than five minutes I was standing in the center of a circle of Vietnamese peasants armed with slashing machetes and flashing axes, watching the edge of the clearing dissolve as they hacked away like large, maddened termites.

The boss surveyed his charges, and when they all seemed busy, he walked toward me with a big grin.

"You like, Da wi?" That was the word for captain. Neither of us knew the word for warrant officer.

"Yeah. Looks like you've got everything under control."

"You like?"

"Yes."

"What's your name?"

"Nguyen, Da wi."

I saw a group of teenage boys talking in a group, facing camp.

"What are those guys doing over there?" I pointed.

Nguyen followed my gesture and immediately rattled off some harsh words that sent the boys back to work. Were they VC? Was Nguyen VC? Was anybody VC? So far, VC were rumors to me, noises on the perimeter at night.

The chopping continued in the blazing sun. Children dragged the debris back toward the center of the circle and piled it up for burning. Everyone sweated profusely. I sweated just sitting on a felled tree trunk. The air sweated.

Sergeant Meyers sweated as he came over from the Jeep.

"What should I be doing, sir?"

Do? I thought to myself. Do? How the fuck would I know what to do? Do you see a sign on me that says Jungle Clearing Specialist? I'm the pilot, you're the sergeant. Sergeants are supposed to know what to do with work details. Everyone knows that.

"Ah," I finally said, "just wander around the circle of workers, Sergeant, and watch the people. Uh, watch for signs, too."

"Signs, sir?"

"Yeah, these people might put markers on the ground to point out our defense positions."

"Oh, I got it." He turned and walked away. I decided to give him the advice always given to me. "Be careful, Sergeant." He turned and nodded gravely.

I had wandered away from the tree I was using for a seat while I talked to Meyers. When I turned to go back, Nguyen was attending to a wounded young girl as she sat on the tree. When I walked up to them, the girl jumped up, but Nguyen barked and she sat back down.

She had a two-inch cut on her ankle. Nguyen wiped at it with the filthy rag that had been his headband. I called to Meyers-who was leering at one of the women fifty feet away-to get the first-aid kit out of the Jeep. The girl watched me carefully, curious and scared.

Meyers got back with the kit, and Nguyen stepped aside, visibly miffed at the intrusion. The girl's dark eyes looked even more frightened in the clutches of an American. Was that what she was thinking? "I'll do it, sir," said Meyers. He rolled her black silk pant leg up past her knee and began to clean the wound with cotton swabs and hydrogen peroxide. The wound foamed with pink bubbles and the girl whimpered. I guess she'd never seen hydrogen peroxide work before. I told Nguyen to tell her it was good medicine.

"Good?" He looked surprised.

"Yes, good." I nodded. "Tell her."

He did, and the girl smiled.

As the girl limped off to have lunch with her family, I decided I would have her teach me some Vietnamese. I told Nguyen. After a lunch of C rations for Meyers and me and rice and unidentifiables for the Vietnamese, the girl sat on the tree trunk with me.

She told me her real name but insisted that I call her by an American name. This beautiful and innocent girl on the other side of the world insisted that I call her Sally. It was depressing.

I learned words by pointing at objects and writing what she said in my notebook-phonetically, of course. Before the day ended, I had recorded many words: among others, clock (damn ho), knife (kai zowa), tooth (zing). We spent an absorbing hour

making up sentences that worked with the words I was learning. In the process of teaching me, she became more relaxed, and smiled.

I heard Nguyen yelling, and looked up. He was scolding a group of people at the south side of the clearing. I noticed that Meyers was sleeping in the Jeep with his hat on his face. I stood up and looked around the circle. At the north side I saw a man sitting in the field, in the midst of busy machetes. I was wondering why he would sit down there when Sally tapped my shoulder.

As she taught me the Vietnamese word for a thing, she would ask me the English word. She tapped my shoulder because I was looking around now instead of teaching her more English. "Tree," I said as she patted our bench. That was not what she meant. I got up and walked toward the Jeep. On the way, I looked back at the man who had been sitting. He was now lying down. That was enough. Give 'em an inch and they take a mile. I called Nguyen over. "Go tell that guy to get to work." I pointed to the malingerer, about a hundred yards away. Nguyen ran off.

"Get up, Sergeant," I said as I got to the Jeep. Meyers lurched forward, dropping his hat. "Sorry, sir. I was on guard duty all night." That was possible. "Okay, but try to stay awake for the hour or so we have left."

"Yes, sir."

As Meyers walked off, I looked to see how Nguyen was doing. He was on his way back. Behind him, the man still slept.

"What's going on, Nguyen?"

"He not work more, Da wi. He dead."

"Dead?" I blinked. "Did you say dead?"

"Yes, Da wi," Nguyen nodded matter-of-factly.

There must be some mistake. This dumb gook doesn't know what I'm saying. The guy's asleep, and Nguyen is trying to protect him. If the guy was dead or dying, all those people around him would have said something. Was it a trick? Nguyen's a VC and he wants me to go over there and be hacked to pieces? Certainly Meyers would never notice.

I walked toward the sleeping man. Nguyen ran up beside me. The guy's probably his brother-in-law.

"Nguyen, I know this guy's sleeping, so don't try to stop me."

Nguyen didn't answer. I felt a tightening in my throat, but I didn't know why.

The man did not get up when I stood next to him. He lay comfortably on his side in the grass while flies and gnats swarmed around the sores on his legs. (All of the Vietnamese had sores on their legs.) He did not breathe. Meyers came up from somewhere, knelt, and checked the man's pulse at his throat. "He's dead, sir."

Nguyen showed me what killed him. Six feet from his body was a beheaded snake. Somewhere among the mass of sores and cuts on his leg was a snakebite. He had been bitten, killed the snake, and then sat down to die. His friends working around him did not stop their work to help. They knew, and he knew, that when that snake bit you, you died. So he did.

At quitting time the refugees lined up fifty feet away from the waiting trucks. The pay officer arrived just as a Jeep was taking the body to an aid station inside the camp. He carried a black vinyl briefcase that looked very out of place in the jungle and from which he produced Vietnamese cash to pay the workers.

While he paid the people, I looked for Sally. I had not seen her since the snakebite incident. She was the only person I knew outside the army. She seemed bright and sensitive. I harbored fantasies of somehow saving her from a grueling existence. I could not find her.

While I looked, I noticed a boy near the front of one of the lines step back onto the toes of the man behind him. The man immediately smashed him on top of the head with his closed fist. The kid sank weakly, almost to the ground, grimacing, but did not say a word.

The trucks drove off. Meyers and I made one last check before we left. We found three distinct arrows pointed at sandbag positions on our distant perimeter. Hash marks on the stems presumably indicated the range. We scattered them.

Late that afternoon I drove into the village of An Khe with Shaker, Farris, and Resler. It was an official trip to buy stuff for the men- candles, kerosene lamps, rice mats, and plastic lawn chairs. Resler and I were along to do the carrying.

The village was small and dusty. A few other Jeeps were parked here and there. One bar seemed pretty lively, but Shaker wouldn't let us go in.

When I looked down the streets, I wondered where the refugees who had worked on the refueling depot lived. I didn't see anybody I recognized.

"Mason, they found a couple of platoon tents this morning," Resler announced through the canvas. I wasn't up yet. He usually beat me to breakfast. "They want us to move out of the pup tents but keep them pitched for now."

"Why?" I said groggily.

"They're going to use them for storage. There's still going to be twenty men in the GPs, so there won't be much room for your golf clubs and polo gear."

Hello, big time. The platoon tents, or GPs, were made of heavy olive-drab canvas stretched over a huge ridge pole. The sides were kept rolled up during the day because the tent's dark color absorbed so much heat that you could feel the outrush of air, like a hot, stale breath, as you walked in the doors. The combination of heat and moisture generated great quantities of mildew and fungus. The tents were mostly uninhabited during the day because of the heat, and because we were supposed to be outside working anyway.

That night the pup-tent colony moved into the cozy new GP. My bed and eight others lined one side of the tent. Ten more ran down the other side. Six inches of space separated my cot from Nate's, on my right. John Hall, from the advance party, was six inches away on my left. Wendall and Barber were across the aisle from me. Still, we could stand up in the tent.

During our first night in the GP we talked about our deposed leader, Major Fields. A lingering ear infection got him grounded. At a surprise meeting before evening chow, he announced his retirement to Saigon and introduced his replacement, Major Williams. For more than two years Fields had been basically one of the boys, with gold braid. Willams gave us a sample of what was to come, with all the charm of an army textbook.

"I've got the highest respect for Major Fields and what he has done with Bravo Company. I can see how much you have done here." He did not smile as he looked over our very loose formation near the mess hall. "But, starting tomorrow, the pace quickens. We have more work to do on the company area, missions coming up, and a lot of training flights. Training is the key to survival. And survival is what it's all about, gentlemen." Heavy eyebrows slanted toward his nose. The wrinkles around his mouth pulled down sternly as he talked about the upcoming missions. His face suited the job perfectly.

"Damn, I'd like to stay around and get tough working on the Golf Course," said Connors as he walked in the crowded warrants' tent. "But our new old man is sending me out tomorrow morning with good old Mason."

"Great." I looked up as I cleaned my new Smith & Wesson .38. "Who else is going?" I slid the flashy, long-barreled, wooden-gripped revolver back into the black hip holster. They had issued these cowboy weapons after we turned in our .45 automatics the day before. Great new toys for the pilots.

"It's a joint effort. Our company's sending four ships. Me and you, Nate and Resler, Wendall and Barber, Hall and Marston." Everybody looked up from tending to his .38. Connors ambled over to Hall. "Damn. It looks like you guys are getting ready for the O.K. Corral."

"You got it wrong, partner," Hall said as he twirled the cylinder of his pistol. He snapped it shut and took aim with both hands at the tent pole. "This isn't the O.K. Corral. It's the Gee Whiz Jungle. Gunfight at the Gee Whiz Jungle." Hall winked and took a healthy swig from his canteen cup.

The mission we had been assigned to was simple: an early-morning flight over the An Khe pass toward Qui Nhon; a left turn up between two skinny ridges into Vinh Thanh Valley, known to us as Happy Valley; drop off the patrols and then go back to an LZ near the pass and laager (stand by). The grunts would call for a pickup. The Cav had been sending out patrols like this since we'd been here. This just happened to be the first one that we were part of.

The troopers assembled on row three of the Golf Course. Each group of ten men had been assigned to an aircraft number. The troopers watched us as though we might sneak away while we did our preflight inspections.

For the occasion of my first mission, I had on my cleanest fatigues, a flak vest, my new .38 in its hip holster, and a pair of real flying gloves. We didn't have chest protectors because they hadn't arrived yet. I reached inside the cockpit of the Huey and connected my helmet to the radio cord, hung it on the overhead hook, and stepped back to follow Connors's preflight.

"Too many dumb bastards have killed themselves by not knowing or caring about preflight. Everything I show you today, I want you to do every day you fly." I nodded. We stood next to the cargo deck on the left side of the helicopter. "First, check the green book." He did. "Plenty of people have missed a big red X that the

crew chief put on the first page. You might miss what he's logged. Remember this is the crew chief's ship, and he's the mechanic. You're just checking his work, so first check what he thinks is the status of the ship." Connors flipped the book shut and stashed it in its pocket at the rear of the center console. Then he squatted down next to the ship. "Everybody knows you're supposed to drain some fuel before the first flight, to get the water condensation out." He pointed under the belly of the Huey. "But I bet half these bastards around here never do." I got down on hands and knees and reached the fuel-drain valve and pushed it to let a few ounces of fuel pour out onto the ground. I didn't see any water drops.

Connors continued the preflight, showing me what he considered important and felt was often overlooked. He understood the machine thoroughly and had the perfect disposition for an IP. We checked the tail rotor. I undid the rotor tie-down strap and removed it. We came to the right side after the walk-around, and Connors crawled up the side of the aircraft using the concealed foot holes between the pilot's door and the cargo door. I joined him. The roof deck of the Huey is flat, so you can walk around to check the rotor hub, the mast, the transmission mounts, and the control rods. He pointed out safety wires on parts of the swash plate, the push-pull tubes, the stabilizer bars, and the control dampers. We carefully inspected the Jesus nut at the top of the mast, which held the whole works in the air. "Everybody checks the Jesus nut, but nobody looks for hairline cracks in these blade-root laminations," said Connors. "What difference does it make if the Jesus nut holds when the blade splits and breaks off?" I nodded.

We climbed into the cockpit to face the morning sun. Stress patterns spiderwebbed brightly in the plastic canopy. A boy called Red, the crew chief for this ship, helped me strap in on the right side. The sun poured in, heating us up quickly. Dark stains grew up from my waist, and I could feel sweat dripping around my concealed derringer. That idea was not going to last long. I put my sunglasses on. Connors watched from the left seat in the classical disinterested-instructor-pilot-who-is-really-watching-like-a-hawk pose. His arms were folded across his flak vest, his head pointed to the front, but his eyes darted over to see what I was doing. I ran through the cockpit check from memory and looked outside to the lead ship, parked two ships over on our right. After a couple more minutes of sweating, I saw the flight leader, in a ship from the Snakes, whirl his hand as the crank-up signal. The starter whined, the

rotors moved slowly, then the turbine caught. The rotors blurred overhead, and we were ready to go. I clicked in the intercom and asked the crew chief and the gunner if they were ready. Answering clicks said they were. "Don't forget to have them check the doors," Connors said. I nodded and asked the two men to check if the pins that held the two sliding doors fully open were in place. They were. Without the pins, the doors could jump out of their tracks and blow off in the wind.

Soon sixteen slicks and four gunships were ready on row three. The troopers waited nearby for us to hover out of our parking slots.

The flight leader assigned each group of four ships-each squad-a color as a call sign, always in the same color order: Yellow, White, Orange, Red. Within the squad we got a number that referred to our position in the formation. Connors and I were Orange Four. Each ship called out its color and number in turn. When the sequence got to our squad, I heard "Orange One." Marston.

"Orange Two." Wendall.

"Orange Three." Nate.

I called, "Orange Four." The Red flight called in after us. We picked up to a hover, moved out, and parked in a long string down the middle of row three.

The troopers-or, as I had been corrected by Connors, the grunts-jumped on board. They wore jungle fatigues and bristled with bandohers of ammunition, M- 16 rifles, M-79 grenade launchers, hand grenades, and canteens. They carried little else, because they were Cav troopers and would be resupplied constantly by us. Three of them squeezed between the crew chief and the gunner on the long bench across the cargo deck, three more on the deck in front of them, and four more in the two pockets. Ten grunts.

"How did they get the name 'grunt'?" I asked while they scrambled aboard.

"That's the IQ of a trooper," Connors said.

"I hope they can't hear that."

"Don't worry, Mason. We're all grunts in the Cav. Didn't you join the army voluntarily?"

"Yes."

"I rest my case."

Red Four called the flight leader and told him the sixteen slicks were loaded. Yellow One rogered and moments later made a sluggish takeoff. The ships followed

in close sequence. When Orange One, Marston and Hall, nosed over on takeoff, I began to ease in the power to get the Huey light on the skids. The nose came up lightly and she shifted a little. I corrected the drift and waited, still light. When Nate and Resler got off, I was right behind them, feeling sluggish with the weight of the grunts. Yellow One climbed slowly over the trees north of the camp, holding his speed down to 60 knots while we closed up in the familiar V formation. As we closed, he made a slow turn to the right toward the An Khe pass. As fourth ship, I joined the left wing of the V formed by the other three ships, making it a heavy-left formation.

As I closed on Orange Three's left, she seemed to fall back, so I decelerated. Then she seemed to lurch too far ahead, and I had to nose over hard to catch her. My lack of formation training was showing. I kept oscillating from too far forward to too far back. Connors let me do it a few times, then said, "I got it."

"You got it."

We fell into position forming a straight line with Orange One and Orange Three after he took the controls. We moved in so close to Orange Three that I could hear the buzzing of their tail rotor.

"Let me show you the tricks to this formation jazz," Connors said.

His grin was partially concealed by his microphone. "First you gotta find two spots on the Huey you're flying on that line up and put you at a 45-degree angle away from their tail. I'll use where the cross tube connects at the rear of Orange Three's left skid as one point and line it up with the front of their right skid, where the cross tube connects. See?" I saw that those two points were lined up, moving slowly relative to each other as the ships surged gently through the air. As he showed me, we were climbing at 80 knots along the highway, toward the pass.

"Now, those are the right reference points if you're flying about level with the other ship. You also have to find two points that work when you have to go higher than them, like when they turn toward you or you have to miss a tree or something. If you make sure you have those reference points lined up, you'll be at the right angle." Connors suddenly raised us above the rest of the flight. "Look across Orange Three's roof deck." The rotors blinked over the air-vent bulges and antennas scattered on top. "I use the air vent on this side lined up with the forward corner of the roof deck." With those two points lined up we were at the correct angle to Orange Three. As we

drifted back down to the same level as the rest of the flight, Connors said, "When you fly formation, try to find your own reference points for every possible position. That way, you'll never get disoriented when the going gets rough. And if you think this is bad, wait till we start doing this shit at night."

"Night formation?"

"Yeah. The trick to that is staying close enough to see their instrument lights. You can practice by flying about this far away, one rotor diameter between the disks. Later you'll learn to move in even closer." He made it look easy. I was determined to be as good. I was so involved with what he was showing me that I barely noticed that we were crossing the pass. "You got it," he said.

"I got it." The reference points gave me something to aim for. I was soon holding us at the correct angle, without hesitating and surging as much.

"While you're holding us on that imaginary 45-degree line, practice letting us drift farther away along that line and then back close again. No matter what the distance between us is, you should be on that line."

As I drifted back, I wondered what Red flight thought about our yoyo-ing around. Orange Three and Orange One were still lined up. As long as I stayed on that line, I would not interfere with Red flight. When I was a hundred yards from Orange Three, I accelerated gently to maintain the position. When I was sure I was holding it where I wanted it, I nosed forward to move back up the line. I was doing fine, but this wasn't a training flight. As I got close to the flight, they turned left in front of us to follow Yellow One. I had to decelerate fast to keep away.

"Try to anticipate the turns," said Connors. "As soon as you see Orange Three begin to bank for a turn toward you, you've got to bank even harder and slow down because you're on the inside of the turn. If you're on the outside of the turn, you must be ready to accelerate as they bank to keep in position. It's kinda like cracking the whip."

I slowed correctly and held my position, but when they leveled out on a north heading up Happy Valley, I didn't anticipate soon enough and fell back. I moved back up feeling very much like a student again.

"Closer," said Connors.

I thought I had been at about the right distance, but I moved closer.

"Closer." Jesus, it looked as though we were overlapped already. I moved in toward Orange Three until I could see Resler clearly through the left door. He turned and waved. I heard the tail rotor buzz again. Way too close.

"That's about right," said Connors. I strained to keep from leaning away. I could see that it was going to take some time before I got used to flying this tight. "When we land in the LZs, we've got to stay tight so everybody can get in. And if we stay tight in the formation, we'll all arrive at the same time, land at the same time, and get the fuck out at the same time. We can cover each other, too."

As Connors spoke, I barely noticed our trip up the valley. Yellow One's call brought me back to reality.

"Okay, Dukes, start your run."

The slicks slowed from 100 knots to about 80 to let the gunships fly ahead. They were B-model Hueys and slower than ours. They were also very heavily loaded with ammunition. They eased ahead of us, dropping at the same time. Our flight continued to decelerate to about 70 knots. We were on a long approach to the LZ, about five miles ahead.

The valley was scrubby here: elephant grass, occasional tall trees, and dry rice paddies. No villages.

I saw white smoke streaming behind the gunships, about a mile ahead of us. They were in position and prepping the LZ with their flex guns and rockets. As we closed the distance and dropped lower, I could see the rockets blasting earth into the air. At 300 feet up and a quarter mile away, Yellow One radioed, clearing us to use our door guns.

"No shooting until I say so," said Connors. Red and the gunner clicked their intercom switches twice. As Yellow flight moved toward the near end of the clearing, I could hear the faint crackling of their door gunners' firing into the tall grass and bushes. Moments later, when our flight was within a hundred yards of landing, and the other ships had started firing, Connors said, "Fire at will." The guns chattered out either side of our Huey. Our guns were so close behind our seats that it felt as though someone were slapping my ears with open palms at each shot. The grunts joined in with their rifles. My adrenaline kicked in and the world got quieter. I felt strangely detached from the scene. I concentrated on the cross tubes of Orange

Three. Tracers from our own guns flowed in my peripheral vision. I felt Connors get on the controls with me. It was a rule. Just in case.

The sixteen slicks flared in unison with Yellow One and settled into the tall grass. My landing was almost automatic; I just mirrored everything Orange Three did. As the heels of the skids hit the ground, the grunts jumped out and bounded off toward the edge of the clearing, firing as they went. I saw no opposition, no incoming fire to remind me that I had no chest armor. None of us did.

Yellow Three waited fifteen seconds, then made his takeoff. We all watched for his tail to move and lifted when he did, staying tight so we wouldn't straggle and delay someone on the ground.

As we climbed over the forward tree line, I heard more machine-gun fire from our flight. "See anything, Red?" Connors said as I banked hard to the left to keep up with the flight. Out his side window the trees passed directly under us. "No, sir." The gunners were just having fun.

"Take a break. I got it."

"You got it."

"You did real good, Bob. I tell you, if that's the way the assaults are going to be, we'll all live through this."

"Yeah. I didn't see any return fire at all," I nodded. "Now what?"

"We go back to the pass and wait."

"Piece of cake," said Nate.

"Nothing to it," Resler replied.

"Heard the rumor? The VC are giving up," said Wendall.

We gathered around a paddy dike and exchanged greetings and impressions. The slicks were parked at Lima, a laager area we would come to know well in the next few months. It was a giant field of dry rice paddies about two miles east of the An Khe pass and next to Route 19. The gunships were still out supporting the grunts.

The dry ground ended a hundred feet from where we were parked, and wet rice paddies ran all the way to a distant village in the east. A group of water buffalo approached from the village. Some kids rode on the buffalo as they splashed through the mud of the paddies. At the head of the line was an old man carrying a staff. As they got closer the old man veered toward us while the others continued on.

"Ron jour," he said.

"What'd he say?"

"He said 'good day' in French," said Nate. "You speak French?" asked Connors.

"RSVP," said Nate. He turned and talked to the old man.

The man grinned broadly when he heard Nate. His hands were gnarled, and his legs were covered with sores. He wore a loincloth and a black shirt. He talked excitedly with Nate.

"What's he saying?" I asked.

Nate shook his head and laughed as he turned to us. The old man watched. "He says that he is glad we came back."

"What's that supposed to mean?" asked Connors.

"He thinks we're French," said Nate.

"Dumb fuck," said Connors.

"Not so dumb," said Wendall. "The French fought a lot of battles around this road. As a matter of fact, they lost a big one right over there at An Khe pass eleven years ago." We followed his hand. "And a lot of the locals around here must have been in their units. Maybe this guy was."

"How do you know that?" asked Connors.

"I read."

Nate told the man that the French had not come back and that we were Americans. Then he had to tell him what Americans were and that we had come from even farther away than the French to help him fight the Communists from the north.

"Ho Chi Minh." The old man grinned broadly.

"He likes Ho Chi Minh?" Resler was shocked.

"He says that Ho is a great man and that someday he'll unite the country."

Resler's eyes narrowed with suspicion. "Doesn't that make him a

VC?"

"I don't know," said Nate. "He seems like a nice guy."

We had C rations for lunch, coffee and cigarettes afterwards. We spent the time trying to stay out of the sun. But even in the shade the muggy air let no one escape the heat.

I talked to Wendall about photography, and about the French. He had read Street Without Joy, by Bernard Fall. His descriptions of how the French were destroyed around here by the same people we were going against got me depressed. The major reason our leaders felt we could win where the French hadn't was our helicopters. We were the official test, he said.

Connors kidded Nate about speaking French. "Only pansies speak French, you faggot."

Resler lay in the shade beside his Huey with his head propped against the skid so that his chin almost touched his chest. He was reading a paperback. A guy from the other platoon came by to show us a mongoose he'd bought from the kids. It was young and tame, and he named it Mo'fuck.

We waited. This was much worse than the assault. Worse than the assault? God, I could see how it was going to be. I would get so bored I would look forward to the battles. Waiting. I remembered a guy saying that if he knew he would be killed during his year here, he hoped it would be immediately so he wouldn't have to put up with the bullshit and the heat and the waiting. What are they doing?

I heard someone whistle through two fingers and looked up front toward the flight leader. Someone waved a hand in a circle over his head.

"Crank up!" I yelled, feeling suddenly refreshed. Orange flight scrambled into their ships and lit the fires. By sundown we had picked up the grunts without incident and had them back at row three. They had spotted nothing on their patrol. Wendall said that the VC wanted to see how we operated before they engaged us.

Leese found me in the chow line the next morning and told me that he and I and Resler were scheduled to go on a training flight that night. "Resler will sit behind us while you fly for a while, and then the two of you will trade places. The old man wants me to check you two out on night approaches and a short cross-country."

So, after a day of shovel work on the Golf Course, the three of us flew night training until midnight. We stayed very high, 5000 feet, but even then we got shot at over Cheo Reo.

"Fifty calibers," Leese said calmly as the big red balls drifted up in front of us. "And they're not even close." Even so, they were close enough for me.

The perimeter around our camp was visible from the air, a hundredyard-wide swath with barbed wire, concertina wire, land mines, and claymores. We had two weak sections, one near Hong Kong Hill and another near the river. Both areas were constantly probed by the VC at night.

If we were seriously attacked, all the ships would be flown off somewhere. I didn't know exactly where, because I wasn't in the evacuation plan. For some stupid reason, a few of us were supposed to stay behind and defend the camp. We could hide in our assholes, as they say. Resler was also part of this team of gung-ho devils.

"Do you know we have shotguns?" he asked me one day. He was actually surveying our weapons, the ones we would use for this defense.

"They're illegal," I said.

"I know, but we have about two dozen of them. You and I and the rest of the expendables are supposed to know about them. You know, to use when they're surging relentlessly over the ditches, screaming 'Tien-len!'"

"What's 'tien-len'?"

"Wendall says that's what they yell as they make their final charge. You know, the human-sea tactics."

"Fuck Wendall."

So each night was full of expectations as I lay on my cot. Listening.

At about this time I read the first article about us in a worn copy of a news magazine being passed around. The tone of the article made us seem heroic because it sounded like an old newsreel. We were referred to by a tag we never used, the First Team. Pretty heroic-sounding, not as tough as "Leatherneck," but better than "Dogface." Beginning with our secret advance team, we had chopped out our 3000-by 4000-foot heliport near An Khe with machetes to make room for our more than 400 helicopters. It mentioned that our lineage went back through Korea and the Philippines and to General Custer.

The article went on to describe why we were there. The American garrisons established in the coastal enclaves had been the first step in helping the South Vietnamese hold on to the territory they already had. The First Team was extending deep into the middle of Viet Cong territory. From there our choppers would allow us

to wander freely throughout Vietnam, hunting down the Viet Cong, undaunted by obstacles such as jungles, mountains, and blown-out bridges.

The piece ended dramatically with the accurate prediction that the First Team was not going to be the last such unit to punch its way into enemy territory. More air mobile units were on the way. Music, helicopters fly into the sunset, fade.

Connors was so high after one mission that he tried to snag the rotor with the tie-down strap while it was still slowly turning. A truck came down the line picking us up and slogged to a stop in front of his ship. Calls of "Get the lead out, Connors" came from the packed deuce-and-a-half. He was the last stop. As one of the blades swooped by eight feet off the ground, Connors held the chock and tossed the loose ends of the straps over it. They wrapped around the blade, tightened, and snatched Connors completely off the ground.

"Haw, Connors, you asshole, where'd you learn that trick?" Nate yelled, delighted.

Connors stood up and tried to dust the mud off the front of his fatigues. He turned to give us a snappy reply, but the whole truckload was laughing so hard that he just looked embarrassed and grinned sheepishly. It was great. Hooray, the company IP makes a mistake. And right in front of all of us, too.

"I would never do that," said Resler, sitting next to me at the back edge of the truck. "Would you do that?"

"Not me," I said. "Would you do that, Riker?"

"Not me," said Riker very loudly. "Only an Instructor Pilot asshole would try to lasso moving rotor blades."

Leese sat smiling next to me. He and I had flown the last mission together, my first hot mission. I felt pleasantly tired, calm, and strangely satisfied.

On our last few missions we had taken patrols out to Happy Valley, dropped them off, and waited at the laager area. On this last one, grunts had made light contact and reported several skirmishes where we had dropped them. We had taken three loads to the LZ; that was three trips in, so we would have to make three trips to get them out.

As we came in for the second pickup, Leese said that Shaker was making a bad mistake flying the same path over the trees each time.

"As soon as the VC get the idea that we repeat our flight path, they'll set up machine guns along it."

We were Orange Four. I was on the controls. I was actually having fun because I was getting pretty good at formation flying. Leese's complaint reminded me that there were people down there who did not give a hoot that I flew formation well. All they wanted was to shoot me down.

"What should we be doing instead?"

"Take a different path in every time. Keep 'em confused."

We landed the second time without incident. Half the grunts jumped onto the sixteen ships, leaving the rest to wait for the last flight. After a thirty-second pause to let us load up, Shaker took off over the forward tree line. We followed his path. The ship I was flying seemed much stronger than usual. I stayed with the flight with no trouble at all, not falling back, as some of the dogships did. When everything was working right, it was exhilarating, this air-assault stuff.

"See, he took off right over the same place he did last time," Leese said through my earphones. "No good," he mumbled. I thought Leese was being too cautious. I thought we were doing fine.

It took thirty minutes to get the grunts back to the Golf Course and return. Shaker led us back to the valley at 1500 feet and 100 knots. About five miles out from the LZ, he dove down to treetop level for the approach. This was the exciting part, the low-level flying. Leese had taken the controls on the way out, and I was getting a great demonstration of low-level flying. He stayed right in the trees while at the same time keeping us close to the number-three ship. Occasionally a treetop would flash between us and them. Leese would let the fuselage pass between two trees, tilting the rotor just in time to pop over the rushing branches. A hundred knots is not all that fast until you're as close to the ground as we were, where the effect of speed is confusing.

"Same flight path," grumbled Leese as the trees streaked by. Shaker was leading us back along the textbook approach, over the lowest obstacles, up a valley of trees toward the LZ-our third trip along the same path.

"Yellow Two taking hits!" Decker's voice shot through me.

"Muzzle blasts from three o'clock." A totally useless call. No call sign; therefore, no position.

As Shaker crossed the forward tree line, he called "Flare" over the radio to warn us to slow for the landing.

"White Two, receiving fire off our right side!" Connors's voice sounded above the crackle of his own machine-gun fire.

We would be at the hot spot any second now. I had already checked the sliding armor panel on the seat. It was all the way forward, but I still felt naked. I was light on the controls, feeling Leese's quick correction. Why the fuck didn't we have chest armor?

As our right door gunner opened up with the machine gun, I tried not to flinch. I watched the passing trees and clearings to see if I could see the enemy. If I could spot them first, I could direct the gunner. Maybe. I'm gonna transfer to guns the second I get back, I thought. At least they can shoot back.

Someone ahead had slowed too much on the flare, and we had to slow even more to keep from colliding. I felt like a fly in molasses, with the swatter coming down. A gunship raced by on our right side, smoke pouring back from his flex guns. The grunts in the LZ were yelling on the radio about taking fire. I glanced across at Leese, but I could not see his face. The LZ was just ahead. For some reason Leese was now wagging the tail as we crossed the last hundred yards before the clearing.

"I saw one!" The door gunner on my side exclaimed. His gun chattered loudly.

"I got him!" His voice was very shrill. "I got him!"

"Orange Four, Charlie at three o'clock," Leese called out for the benefit of the Red flight behind us.

"Sir, I got him!"

"Keep looking," I yelled. "Keep fucking looking!"

The slicks squatted into the LZ, and the grunts raced from their cover at the tree line and jumped on board. Red Four, the last ship, called out that all the grunts were on board. Shaker acknowledged by taking off immediately. He turned slightly left, following the same path out as the last two times. Before Leese and I crossed the forward tree line, a ship in Shaker's flight called that he was taking fire. Leese turned harder left and cut the corner of the turn that Shaker had taken, wagging the tail again. He stayed lower than anybody else, too. In the trees. As each group of four ships passed over the tree line, I heard calls about taking hits or receiving fire. ("Taking hits" meant, obviously, bullets hitting your ship. Visible muzzle blasts, puffs of smoke, or Charlie taking a bead constituted "receiving fire.")

We darted low-level among the trees for a mile or so before climbing to a safe altitude. It was quiet now. My shoulders drooped.

"Anybody hurt?" Shaker called.

No answer. Our ships had taken only a few minor hits. Decker had one bullet hole through a rotor blade. Nate had one come through his canopy. Another of our pilots, Captain Sherman, had one stopped by his seat armor. It had knocked the breath out of him when it hit. I saw the crater it formed on the bottom of his seat when we got back. That armor really worked. Now, if only we had something in front of us. A bullet-proof helmet would be nice, too.

"How about a plane ticket back home?" said Resler as we joked in the back of the truck. "That'll keep the bullets away."

Connors crawled into the truck after he tied the rotors down. "Anyone here tells anyone back at the company about my fight with the rotors gets a bad grade on their next check ride."

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Chapter Four
Happy Valley

> Americans are big boys. You can talk them into almost anything. All you have to do is sit with them for half an hour over a bottle of whiskey and be a nice guy.
>
> -Nguyen Cao Ky, July 1965

October 1965

It had been raining steadily for almost half an hour when Connors decided to take the plunge. I saw his hairy ass bouncing out the back door of the warrants' tent. He was carrying his combat helmet and a bar of soap.

"Oh, this is the life!" Connors yelled from outside. "Oh, yes. Clean, clean, clean. I wish some of you smelly bastards would take the goddamn hint!" He broke into unintelligible song.

Banjo bounded outside, naked.

"The first of the smelly bastards arrives," Connors announced. "Welcome, miss. Set your helmet down here."

"Oh, thank you," Banjo said in falsetto.

Kaiser ran out, then Riker, then Nate and some officers from the next tent. Soon most of the company was outside, showering in the rain.

Even me. Against my better judgment. Last time we tried this, the rain stopped when I was fully lathered. Several of us had got caught. We had waited around, standing in the mud, soap suds tightening on our skin as it dried, for the rain to start again. It never did.

Thirty of us played around in the mud near the long washstand we'd made. A bunch of steel helmets stood on the frame as washbasins, collecting water in case the rain did stop.

"It's my dick, and I can wash it as often and as fast as I want," somebody yelled.

"Well, I never!" Banjo minced. "Don't you know that's bad for you?"

"Well, what the hell, I've been shaving my palms since I was fourteen."

There was the usual horseplay: cover-your-asshole-when-you- bendover jokes, soap-bar wars, falling in the mud and rinsing off. It was the first good time we'd had in a month. And we got clean.

We found some more of our missing Conex containers. Most of our tents turned up. The warrant tent was divided: nine warrant officers in one GP. Luxury at last. Five of us-Leese, Kaiser, Riker, Resler, and I-each got an eight-foot section along one side. Nate, Gotler, Connors, and Banjo each got a ten-foot space along the other side. This was to be our permanent tent.

We decided to install a wooden floor and electric lights. Four of us went to town to buy the wood for the floor and the stuff for the lights. I was in charge of getting the wire and fluorescent fixtures because I lied about knowing how to wire the place. I wanted to go to town.

As our truck passed through the division's southern perimeter, the guard pointed to a man hanging dead from the flagpole. We'd heard about this the day before.

"The local authorities caught him with some American supplies. The Cav had them hang him up there as a lesson," he said.

The man's head was bent over to one side as the noose cinched into the skin of his neck. As we drove by, the angle changed, and I watched him turn slowly and then grow smaller as we continued on.

"Some lesson, huh, Gary?" I said to Resler, who sat across from me in the back of the deuce-and-a-half.

"Yep," he said. "Guess he'll never steal again.

We rolled into town. Resler and I jumped out while Leese and Nate went to park the truck. They were supposed to shop for wood while Gary and I looked for the electrical supplies. First, we decided to have a look around. We hadn't been here for a couple of weeks, and the place sure had changed.

Dusty old An Khe was now a jumping army town. New bars were packed to overflowing with hundreds of GIs. The streets were crowded with busy vendors from miles around.

We walked by a girl with a baby on her back, papoose style. I had seen her approaching some GIs from a distance, but I didn't realize what she was doing until we passed her. She was asking for money, then pushing the baby toward the shopper, making it clear that she wanted to sell the kid. My head twisted around to watch her as I walked. I finally figured it out and turned to follow her. Gary said, "What's wrong?"

"I can't believe it. She's trying to sell that baby!"

"Who?" Gary hadn't noticed, but when he saw where I was going, he said, "Oh," and followed me.

The girl was all of twelve or thirteen years old. I had started to tell her that it was wrong to do what she was doing when I noticed something peculiar about the baby. Gnats were crawling all over the slits of its eyes. It wasn't blinking. I reached out to touch its pale cheek. When my fingers touched cold skin, I knew I had discovered something I didn't want to know.

"Why does she want to sell a dead baby?" asked Gary.

"I don't know." My voice was calm, but inside I cringed away from her. She saw the fear in my eyes. I stared at her for a moment while I thought, How could you do this? Her weary eyes flicked away from mine to find another customer.

We walked across the street, which was strewn with gum wrappers and cigarette butts. I stopped to look for a hardware store.

Gary went on ahead. There weren't any stores around here, just bars. I saw Gary duck into one of the doorways. I followed him.

I stepped through the beaded curtain. The bar was crowded with GIs and bar girls. It seemed to me there were more bar girls there than there had been people in town two weeks before.

"Buy me a drink?" a girl said as I walked farther into the mob. She pushed me to a seat at a little table. Three more bar girls argued with my captor about who was to be my girl friend. As flies and gnats swirled around us and played in the beer puddles on the table, one of the girls got out of her lawn chair to sit in my lap.

"You numma-one jai," she chopped out in a monotone as she wriggled her buttocks against me. "You numma-one jai," she repeated and moved her face closer to mine, nervous eyes darting in a smiling mask.

I think she was just as embarrassed as I was. She was new at her job. So was I. I sat there wide-eyed but trying to look nonchalant, like a warrior out to get laid.

"You numma-one jai," she said again and pushed her little, flat nose

against mine and breathed fish breath into my face. That breath and her limited vocabulary were snapping me out of grinning aw-shucksness. I wanted to leave.

She saw my expression change, and realizing that I was getting ready to make a break for it, she pulled out the reserves.

"You numma-one jai!" At last, some emotional inflection. Her eyes flirted. Her free hand reached down through her lap to grab a sincere handful of my crotch.

I jumped with surprise. I was embarrassed, also a little titillated, but I stood up and put the little masher back in her chair. Once I was standing, I used the opportunity to make it obvious I was looking for Resler. So I stood there for a minute searching through the mob, slapping little, sneaky hands away, but I couldn't find him.

"Shouldn't even think about it," I muttered as I walked outside to resume my search for a hardware store. I liked that girl; at least, my hormones liked that girl. Warnings about the dreaded Vietnamese cock-rot came to mind. "Sometimes amputation is the only cure" was one description of its severity. Another was "There are guys who have been quarantined in 'Nam since '61 trying to be cured." Or "I heard of a guy who woke up one morning and found his pecker had fallen off Son of a bitch has to squat to piss. Damn."

"Hey, Bob, where you going?" I turned and saw Resler coming up the street toward me.

"To find some light fixtures, remember? Where were you?"

"Me? I was looking for you. Did you get any?" We both walked down the dusty street. If there had been horses instead of Jeeps, it would have looked like an Old West town. Most of the doors we passed were entrances to small bars. Small boys ran up to every soldier, yelling, "Hey, numma one, you. Want boom-boom? You come with me. Two dollar."

"'Get any'? Not me, Resler. I don't need the clap," I said smugly. We turned off the main street into a narrow, shaded alley. There were shops here with everyday goods behind glass windows.

"You can't get the clap, Mason. You're immune." We stopped in front of a store window featuring cheap tools, wire, small electric motors, and light fixtures. This was the place.

"What do you mean, 'immune'?"

"It's one of the advantages of being an officer. We get 'nonspecific urethritis.' Enlisted men get the clap."

The shopkeeper spoke no English, but with the objects we wanted in

plain sight, we had only to point. I bought nine fluorescent light fixtures-bulbs, ballast, and wire. Now if I only knew what to do with them.

The old salts had been through the development of air-assault techniques in the 11th Air Assault, plus the full-scale test of Air Assault II in the Carolinas; but the bullets had been fake, the enemy was really on the same side, and judges told you when you were dead. Now that we were flying in the real world, the old salts were unhappy about how their commanders forgot their training.

"I cannot fucking believe it," said Connors. "You'd think that we never even heard of air assaults, much less done it." We sat around a picnic table in the new mess tent after our first big assault in Happy Valley.

"Captain Farris, who decided to fly low level across the rice paddies like that?" Connors pleaded as he leaned toward Farris.

"Wasn't right, was it?" Farris answered.

"How the hell can they ignore all that fucking time we spent trying out every conceivable way there is to approach hot areas. Rice paddies don't offer any cover. You only fly low level when there's cover-trees, riverbeds, valleys-something." Connors looked deflated; Farris didn't answer. There was no answer.

I was depressed. I was supposed to be learning how to be an aircraft commander in an air-assault company. I wondered if I would live through the training program.

The day before, at six o'clock in the afternoon, sixty-four ships forming an entire air-assault battalion gathered on the Golf Course, loaded troopers, and flew to Lima, the laager area just on the other side of the An Khe pass.

At that point the old salts were already pissed off. We were to spend the night at Lima, only ten miles (seven minutes) closer to our objective, Happy Valley, than if we had stayed at the secure Golf Course.

After we landed, some of our ships went back to the division to fetch hot chow for us and for the five hundred grunts. Wendall, Connors, Nate-all the old salts-complained about being there. Wendall kept pointing out that the VC were famous for their surprise ambushes against the French right around where we were camped. It was not a good night. We slept in the Hueys. Everyone was jumpy, and the mosquitoes were intense. At 0400 hours we were awake, and at 0545 we cranked up and flew the troops to an already secured LZ north of Lima to group with another Cav unit for the big push.

Instead of flying at 1500 feet, this flight leader flew low level all the way. There were no shots fired, but it was a curious move. The gaggle landed and dropped the troops only to find out it was the wrong LZ. We reloaded the grunts, and on the second attempt we made it to the correct LZ. There we waited.

During the half-hour wait, the old salts really went wild.

"Why the fuck did we come up here low level?" Connors shouted, cornering Shaker. Shaker just shrugged and looked unhappy. Apparently someone new was leading this assault, but Shaker was a platoon leader and wouldn't comment about what his brethren in the braid were up to.

I was flying with Leese, but he didn't say anything either, just looked pissed off. The second stage of the assault was ready to commence. The word came back that we should expect to receive opposition on the flight route.

"I sure wish we had chest protectors," said Resler. "You know, if they know we're going to get shot at and they still fly low level, they ought to give us some armor, don't you think?" I nodded, distracted. Seeing the regulars bitch like this wasn't good for my morale.

The other unit stayed behind to form a second wave. Our gaggle loaded up.

From there to the real LZ were ten miles of rice paddies, spotted with villages ringed with trees and an occasional lonely coconut palm or clump of bushes-the kind of place you're supposed to stay away from, especially if you know it is controlled by the VC.

If it was going to be low level, then Leese was going to make it low level. He actually tried to fly the contours of the paddy dikes at 100 knots. I sat in the right seat with my hands and feet near the controls, waiting, tense, scared. We were Orange Three. On our right front, Nate and Farris flew Orange One; on our left rear, Sherman and Captain Daisy flew Orange Four. Across the V, Resler and Connors flew Orange Two. The distance between us varied as each ship dodged occasional coconut trees and tall bushes. Over the radios I could hear the prestrike commentary going on in my earphones. From 5000 feet above us I heard our battalion commander, the Colonel, telling us to maintam a neater formation as we spread out over the flat plain.

Up ahead, from the trees around a village, I could actually see muzzle flashes. Then I heard ships in the Yellow flight calling, taking hits. Then from small brush clusters I hadn't noticed before came more bullets. Soon the radios were jammed with hit reports. Above the din I heard "Do not fire into the villages; do not fire into the villages," from the Colonel. On our left, Sherman and Daisy kept lagging back and then lurching forward, sometimes beside and sometimes behind us. I heard them call "Orange Four, we're hit!" Then they dropped back out of sight. They had taken a burst through the cockpit, and the debris from the shot had temporarily blinded Sherman. Leese tried to stay away from the villages, but there was no way to do that; they were on the flight path. Tricky flying was to no avail here. I could stare at muzzle flashes for long moments as we flew straight at them, and the VC had the same amount of time to fire at us. Low-level flying was supposed to minimize exposure time, but it wasn't working here.

The flight up the valley was lower, faster, and much hotter than anything I had yet seen. By the time we got to the LZ, my brain was numb. I don't know what I would have done if Leese had got hit.

The LZ was no different from the rest of the valley except that there were more bushes. Despite an artillery prep and rockets from our gun-ships, it was hot. Bullets came from the bushes, from behind paddy dikes, from hidden trenches. The grunts leapt out as soon as we touched down, increasing the confusion. Up ahead a VC jumped out of a hidden hole and charged Connors's ship. Nobody on Connors's ship saw him, but his wing man's door gunner did. He shot him in the back.

The flight leader, noticing that we had indeed "received opposition," led us back to the first LZ at 2000 feet, proving that the concept that helicopters can fly higher than four feet was known to him.

Although most of the ships had been hit, only two pilots were seriously wounded and had to be evacuated. Ten more, including Wendall, Barber, and Sherman, got minor face cuts from flying Plexiglas. Leese and I were untouched.

A few days later Farris assigned me to fly a mission with Captain Daisy-another troop lift into Happy Valley. Half the ships were from the Snakes, half from the Preachers. The LZs were getting hotter by the day. No one ever figured how the VC always knew which clearing we would use for an LZ. There were thousands of possibilities, but Charlie would almost always be waiting for us in the one we picked.

Daisy thought of himself as a war historian. He was always the most vocal in the late-night discussions about how the war should be fought. As a matter of fact, I agreed with his premise that we should be taking real estate instead of bouncing all over the place in hit-and-run exercises. But except for the bullshit of our late-night strategy sessions, we had little in common.

I was in the right seat, first pilot's position, a courtesy extended by Daisy. Later I almost always flew from the left seat, even when I was the first pilot, because the left side of the Huey's instrument panel was chopped and I could see straight down to the ground between my feet.

We flew east to Happy Valley at 3000 feet. I was always happy to be flying high. Even higher would have been fine with me. Very few pilots were killed by staying away from the ground. We had eight grunts in the back. A crew chief and gunner in

the pockets behind them manned the two machine guns on the new pylon mounts. About five miles from our intended LZ, the flight leader, Major Williams, radioed the sixteen ships to descend to treetop level for the final run. As we began our dive, smoke drifted up from the jungle ahead of us. There had been a thorough prestrike by the air force and by our own gunships.

Up to this point in the mission, Daisy had been flying. As we leveled out for the low-level run, Daisy said over the intercom, "You got it." I took the controls. I remember feeling complimented that he would let me take control at the most critical part of the flight.

The flight was really moving. Using the speed gained in the dive, the whole gaggle flashed through the treetops at more than 110 knots. I concentrated on the reference points and on keeping one or two rotor diameters away from the other ship. At the same time, I let us down into the trees as close as possible for cover. I had to read the ship to my right constantly to avoid it when it swerved left and right to miss the smaller trees.

We were about a minute away from touchdown when the gunships started firing. Some of the guys were now reporting taking rounds. The rule was that on the actual approach into the LZ, and in any circumstances where the crew was under fire, both pilots were supposed to be on the controls. This procedure was to ensure control of the aircraft if the one who was flying got zapped. Daisy didn't do this. As we got within thirty seconds of our landing and the lead ships were reporting taking hits, Daisy started to hunch down in the armored seat.

I had my hands full, but other than hitting one frond on a coconut tree, I was doing okay. From the corner of my eye, I saw Daisy moving. I risked a quick glance. He gave me a weak smile and hiked his chest protector up to his nose. He had one of the few pieces of chest armor in the company. He had worked his body down in the seat so that his ass rested on the front edge. This brought his head down almost low enough for his chest armor to hide his face. He could not fly from this position. Seeing my aircraft commander ducking for cover brought me to a new level of fear.

"Preacher flight, flare!" crackled in my phones. I pulled back on the cyclic and reduced collective to flare, and looked frantically ahead, trying to see over the nose of the Huey to get my first glimpse of the still unseen LZ. My tail rotor spun just a few feet from the ground. I saw some bushes ahead, and I pushed the right pedal to

swing the rotor away. Steeply, noses high, the whole flight rapidly decelerated for the landing.

Luckily for us, the fire at the back of the LZ was lighter. A couple of pilots up front had already been wounded. The grunts jumped out even before the skids touched the ground. I looked over, and Daisy was still under cover. I was going nuts. The LZ was riddled with sniper fire. Sand kicked up in front of me. Daisy stayed low even while I cleared the last trees on the way out. As I climbed higher, hit reports decreased, and by the time we had climbed to about 1500 feet, they stopped.

As the flight leveled off, Daisy said, "I got it," and took control of the helicopter, just as though nothing had happened. I felt like punching my head to make sure I was still there.

I sat limply in my sweat-drenched fatigues and tried to figure out what to do. Call Williams and tell him I have a chickenshit on board? I leaned forward a little and turned to look at Daisy. Actually, I stared. He glanced over for a second, calmly. Who was crazy here? He out-ranked me; he was the aircraft commander, with years of experience.

He had been flying daily with the other guys, and now he looked as 2 calm as a clam. Yet I knew he had done what he had done.

Finally I said, "What happens if I get hit while you're in that position?"

"I'll have time." When I turned to look at him, he wouldn't look back.

I flew two more sorties with Daisy, back to the same area. Each time, he went through the same routine of passing the ship to me and ducking for cover behind his chest protector.

"How can that jerk be an aircraft commander?" I glared at Farris.

"Hey, Bob, jerk is a strong word." Farris looked uncomfortable as we talked in his tent after the mission.

"He endangered everybody in our ship and in the rest of the formation. Even I can tell a coward when I see one." Farris could see I was agitated. Maybe I was so angry because I had been just as afraid as Daisy.

"Yes, well, he's better than no pilot at all," said Farris.

After a long discussion with Farris, it became clear that Daisy was just one of the circumstances of war that I would have to accept. As a new warrant, though, I ended the discussion pretty firmly.

"I will never fly with him again," I said.

"Okay," said Farris, "you never will."

And that was that. No action was taken against Daisy.

"What did you expect, a firing squad?" Connors remarked as we stood in the chow line that night.

"No," I said. "But maybe they could ground him and put it on his record."

"Look, Bob, everybody in the company knows he's a coward. Even he knows he's a coward. The only people who will fly with him are the new guys like you, who don't know any better," said Connors.

"Well, I'm not flying with him anymore."

"Now, that," another voice interrupted, "is going to shake him up, Mason." It was John Hall. He had been standing behind Connors, listening to our conversation. "What you have to do," he continued, "is teach him a lesson."

"What do you mean?"

"You'll have to kill him," said Hall.

"Why are you making fun of me?" I looked at him seriously. "I really think something should be done, like grounding him, or putting him in the operations tent with his own kind."

John looked at me quizzically. "My, my," he said. "Are you accusing the operation twins of being," he paused to look around and continued in a whisper, "of being chickenshit cowards, too?"

Connors started laughing. Owens and White, from the operations tent, never flew in the assaults. The rumor was that they were logging combat time, though, for medals.

Hall continued, "If that's the case, Mason, it's going to be messy."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, how do you expect to eliminate all three of them without making a mess?" Hall grinned madly for a second and took a giant swig from his canteen full of Scotch-his trademark.

We laagered at Lima in the drizzling rain. Most of the crews in the twenty-four ships sat in their seats, though Nate had left his, beside mine, to visit around. The

village looked distorted through the raindrops on the Plexiglas. The air was hot and still and humid. The rain brought no relief. Behind me the crew chief cleaned his weapon and the gunner slept. The ship beside me was the lead ship, and the Colonel had walked up beside it to talk to our CO, Williams. We had been here two hours. Waiting.

"Sir, I bet you never saw a .45 like this before." The crew chief, Sergeant LaRoe, leaned up between the seats and thrust his gun toward me.

"Looks pretty much like a .45 to me," I said. LaRoe was not a regular crew chief; he was a maintenance supervisor getting some flying time.

"That's what it looks like, sir, but it's my private weapon, not an army issue. I've made some modifications to it."

Great. A gun hobbyist. "Really?"

"Yep. For one thing, I've filed the trigger sear so that it only takes a feather to release the trigger."

"Why?"

"Well, if you have to squeeze too hard to pull the trigger, it throws off your aim."

"Oh. Great." LaRoe had the gun wavering a foot from my face, waiting, I suppose, for me to take it to admire. I didn't. He moved back suddenly and I heard a click-clack. I turned and saw him pulling the magazine out of the handle.

"Try it, sir. You won't believe how light it is. I filed away a lot of the metal."

"That's okay, LaRoe, I believe you. I'm sure it's a great little weapon, all right."

"C'mon, sir. Just dry-shoot it once." LaRoe pushed the gun my way, holding up the magazine as he did. "Here, I just cleared it."

I was thinking about how much LaRoe probably liked it here with all the real guns and bullets around. I should've thought more about how he had given me the gun.

It was cocked, so I held it gingerly, though I knew it was empty. I pointed it up and looked for a target. I had never been good with pistols, rifles being my forte. The sights wavered. A Huey lined up, fragmented by the water drops. I moved the aim away from the ship, an automatic precaution. The Colonel's back filled my sights. It was really crowded out there. So I continued to sight, holding the gun now with two hands, moving it around to find a clear, though dry, shot. I settled on one of the gauges on the instrument panel in front of me. I thought about pulling the trigger, and the gun exploded, slapping back against j my hand. The gauge shattered and

disappeared. I went deaf and into shock at the same time. Holding the gun in front of me, watching the smoke curl lazily out of the barrel, I considered turning around and killing LaRoe. However, the gun really was empty now.

I calmly passed the gun back to him. His face was white. "Nice trigger pull, Sergeant. No doubt about it."

A small crowd had gathered around the front of my Huey to examine the exit wound in the ship and the small crater in the mud where it finally stopped. The Colonel watched with his arms folded as I climbed out. The thought balloon next to his head read, "Dumb shit." Williams just sat in his seat behind him, glaring.

Up to that point I was just beginning to feel accepted by the old salts. Shit.

Williams did not say a word until we got back to the company after the mission. Before evening chow he sent Owens, the operations officer, to fetch me.

"Major Williams wants to see you in his tent." Hee, hee.

"That was the dumbest, stupidest, most moronic move I have ever seen in my life," Williams said. But he did not say I was an asshole.

"But-"

"There is absolutely no excuse for a supposedly intelligent pilot to play with a gun like you did."

"But-" I was trying to blame it on LaRoe. "If you ever shoot up one of my helicopters again, I'll have your hide. You got that, mister?" He was a little tense, so I decided to go along with him.

"Yes, sir." I saluted on the way out.

Just to rub it in, they hung the remains of the omni-gauge-a radio-navigation instrument-in the operations tent. A little note was attached to one of the uncoiled springs explaining that it was the victim of the first shot fired at the Cav from inside one of its own helicopters.

The airfield south of the Cav was built by the French, and the Cav considered it part of their property. We occupied the airfield and the land around it, including an area on the nearby riverbank that was the site for our new shower station. The Cav engineers had set up a group of special water-processing trucks next to the river. They pumped the water through self-contained devices that chemically treated, filtered, and heated the water before pumping it inside adjoining GP tents equipped

with wooden-slat floors and a dozen shower heads. About six of these trucks and tents made up the bathing area.

The first time I heard somebody yell "Shower call" I thought I was hearing things. Showers were something the advisers took in their established compounds and Special Forces camps. Sure, people in Saigon, Qui Nhon, Nha Trang, and Pleiku took showers, but weren't they tourists? Until now, the Cav's brass seemed to feel that the dirtier we got, the more depressed we became, which made us madder, which made us chop stumps harder, or something like that. Anyway, we were generally filthy, so the words themselves were a touch of comfort.

The day after I shot out the omni-gauge, twenty-five of us were packed into the back of a deuce-and-a-half, smelling ripe, on the way to the shower station.

Connors had actually taken a liking to me after the incident with the gun. For him, liking someone meant including that someone in a cynical observation.

"So, Bob, did the omni-gauge make a move toward you first, or did you just ambush it?" I was on the floor with my back to the cab. Connors and Banjo sat jammed together on the bench beside me. Resler sat next to me. He started to laugh at Connors's remark.

"Yeah, Bob," said my supposed friend Gary, "did it give you any warning before it attacked? Like moving its pointer or something?"

"Look, Gary," Connors inexplicably jumped to my defense, "anyone can make a mistake." I smiled at his generosity. "I mean," he continued warmly, "how was Mason to know that the gauge was going to come after him like that!"

The truck pulled up. We jumped out, carrying towels and fresh clothes, and ran to the shower tents.

It was luxurious. Hot water filled the tent with steam. I stayed in as long as I could, rinsing away the accumulated grime and rejuvenating my spirits.

"We have got to build one of these back at tent city!" said Marston.

"Can we do that?" I asked.

"Sure. All we have to do is figure out how to get the water," said Marston. "And the only way I figure we can get to it now is to dig a well by hand. And we're on high ground, so the well would have to be deep, maybe a hundred feet."

It sounded impossible to me at the time. We did it a few months later.

After washing, we wandered around outside the tents drying in the sun and getting dressed. I sat in the sun for a few minutes, naked. The hot water had soothed my muscles. The sun seemed to radiate energy into my body. I was completely relaxed.

I was idly watching two guys from another company as they walked near a shower tent about a hundred feet from me when they disappeared in a shattering explosion.

With the noise, I reflexively looked out to the perimeter. Who? What? Are we being attacked? My throat tightened with fear.

Not VC. Not a stray mortar round. Nothing we were prepared for. The two cleanly scrubbed grunts had made a final discovery: land mines last and last. At least eleven years, anyway. The French had heavily mined the airfield before they were driven from An Khe, in 1954.

They put the showers off limits for a few days while men from demolition burned the weeds and grass away with flame throwers and swept the area with mine detectors. Mines were found and blown up, and the spot was declared safe again.

Flying out to Happy Valley became a daily routine. It didn't seem to make much difference, unless you happened to be one of the Americans killed during these few weeks. Or one of the supposedly three hundred VC. Then it made a lot of difference. To the rest of us, the ones alive, the result of our daily grind was fatigue and irritability.

Wendall said that the VC were bending with the force to learn more about how the Cav operated. He may have been right. They seemed to control the situation. We wanted them to stand and fight and they wouldn't-very frustrating for the "First Team."

To prove they controlled the valley, they not only would know which LZ we were going to use and greet us there but would also wait until we were in the middle of an extraction to shoot again. In between it was snipers from shadows.

I was getting plenty of practice. I got very good at low-level and formation flying. I learned how to function, even though I was scared shitless, by doing it over and over again. I had become efficient, numb, or stupid. I learned that everyone adapts and becomes concerned with the details of the job at hand, no matter how bizarre.

Although I flew with several different pilots as I trained for aircraft commander, I flew the bulk of my time with Leese. He taught me things that saved my life several times.

We were on an extraction mission up Happy Valley to pull out some troops we'd dropped off the day before. We heard the ships ahead calling in hits on the way into the supposedly secure LZ. Leese put the gunners on alert.

"Tell me if you see a target," he said to me. Putting my hands and feet lightly on the controls was a completely automatic response by this time.

Our company of sixteen ships was the last flight on this extraction, so all the troopers pulled away from the tree lines and jumped on ships in groups of eight. Eight was the load for today. (How much the ship could carry depended on the density altitude, which varied with the temperature and humidity and altitude. The hotter or higher-and therefore thinner-the air was, the less we could carry. The limit was calculated daily.) But there was a fuck-up. After everybody had eight grunts on board, there were four men left over, running around being turned away. Leese saw this and immediately called for them to run back to us. Confused, they ran to the ships that were trying to tell them to come back to us. Everybody was nervous. The four grunts didn't want to be left behind. Reacher jumped out the back and waved. They finally got the message and came back. I didn't understand Leese's decision. We already had eight troopers on board. I'd been in a ship that had dragged the trees trying to get out of an LZ with eight on a day like today. Twelve was impossible. Finesse, luck, experience-none of that would get twelve grunts off the ground today.

As soon as they squeezed inside, Leese brought in the power. I could feel the air pressure build up under the rotors as they struggled, pulling the overloaded ship slowly off the ground. Then he radioed Williams that he could make it. Leese stayed in a hover as the company took off. I glanced at the power gauge. It must have been broken. It indicated that we were using 105 percent of available power. As the company lumbered over the tree line, I heard them firing down into the jungle, then a few calls of hits, then we were alone. Leese nosed the stuffed Huey gently over, letting it accelerate across the ground to gain lift. He kept it just over the grass even as the trees approached. The gauges showed he was pulling maximum power, and we were running out of room. Then, somehow, he pulled in power beyond maximum. The ship groaned up and over the trees. I felt a tug when the skids hit treetops. The

company had flown to the left at takeoff, but Leese turned right. I scanned the clearings and bushes below, looking for muzzle flashes or smoke, but I saw nothing. The ship climbed much slower than normal. It took us a long while to get up to the safety of altitude, but we got there.

"How did you know this ship would be able to do that?" I asked.

"Simple. This is Reacher's ship," Leese answered.

"I don't understand."

"This is the only ship in our company that can haul a load this big.

Right, Reacher?"

"That's right, sir, and more." Reacher's voice hissed in my earphones.

Reacher had made certain fine, illegal adjustments of the turbine. I had never flown the ship before-Leese kept it to himself-so it was news to me. An army training film I saw would prove that it shouldn't have worked, but it did. The ship muscled through an important career for the next two months, saving a lot of lives, until I destroyed it.

The ship may have been stronger than usual, but it still took a lot of experience to know just what the limit was, and how to milk it all out. Leese was good at knowing the absolute limits of aircraft. He made that a part of his bag of survival tricks. It was Leese who taught me that our fixed position in the assault formation was really fixed only as far as our horizontal movement was concerned. You could-as he demonstrated on several occasions-move the ship up and down relative to the formation without throwing the flight off. He would do this rapidly while the flight was being shot at. On final approaches to hot LZs he kicked the tail back and forth, making us waggle into the clearings. His theory was that any movement of the target made it more difficult to hit by confusing the enemy gunners. I adopted this style of flying. Whether it really made a difference didn't matter; I thought it did. It kept me occupied in otherwise hopeless situations.

We joined our company after the long climb up with the twelve grunts. Miles ahead of us the lead company in the battalion was reporting machine-gun fire near the pass at 3000 feet. Fifty caliber. We had never encountered these heavyweight calibers before. Our company veered off to avoid the fire. We could hear the commotion on the radios as voices in the static told us what was happening.

"Big as baseballs!" A reaction to the fifty-caliber tracers.

"Jesus, Yellow Two is going down!"

"Yellow flight, break formation!" They were spreading out.

I could see those tracers, in their lazy-looking flight upward, from five miles away. In between each tracer were four more bullets. A fifty caliber machine gun spits out bullets a half inch in diameter and an inch long. When you held one of those slugs in your hand, it had a hefty throwing weight. When blasted out of a gun at 3000 feet per second, it had incredible power and range.

The battalion veered away from the ambush, leaving the gunships behind to harass the VC. I also heard the Colonel call for artillery. Five ships got shot out of the sky; two pilots were killed; the other crews were saved. A gunship was hit sixty-six times and still flew, a record one might boast about except that the pilot was killed. The copilot flew the sieve back to the Golf Course.

Our company flew back to division, dropped off the grunts who had been out for two days, and picked up a fresh batch. We took these to Lima, and for the rest of the day we flew more troops and equipment out to this bivouac. By late afternoon we had logged eight hours of flying time. I was tired and looking forward to getting back to division. Home, these days, was where the hot food was.

This was not to be. It was decided by someone or other that we would stay out at Lima with the grunts.

It was the second time we had done this. As with the last time, there was no warning. No one had sleeping gear, or even a decent selection of C rations.

Half a battalion, thirty-two helicopters, landed at Lima. We brought a load of grunts with us, and they jumped off to join their fellows as soon as we landed. They formed a perimeter around this now valuable patch of Vietnam. Thirty-two hated helicopters and their crews sat in the middle of VC-land waiting for the mortars to come in. Why did we do this? Why park here, seven minutes from the safety of the Golf Course?

"Well, Bob, if we had to get here early tomorrow morning, which we do, what would we do if the pass was socked in?" he answered. He stood next to his cargo deck sorting through his C-ration case, looking for something.

"Fly over the pass and circle back," I said.

"Well, see, that's a maybe." Farris's square jaw was set for a thoughtful reply. "If the weather isn't too bad, we could; but if it was bad, we couldn't. If we couldn't, we couldn't be here until the fog burned off." His brow wrinkled as he paused, pulling

his graying crewcut forward. "That would delay the mission, and some people might die because of it."

He stopped talking. He had found a box of C rations that hadn't been robbed of the coffee packet. He smiled like he was seeing an old friend. We were always short of coffee packets because we stole them from the boxes when we had to laager for any length of time. He looked at me. "So, do you understand now?"

"Yes, I can understand that." I shook my head as Farris offered me a can of cookies. "What I can't understand, though, is why we don't plan ahead. Why is it always a surprise that we're going to have to stay out overnight?" Farris listened while he levered the folding P-38 can opener supplied with each meal around the can of cookies. He pried up the olive drab can lid to expose three big shortening cookies, which he again offered to me. I waved them away.

"Well," he answered. "That's pretty complicated, why we don't plan ahead." He dumped the cookies out of the can, back into the C-ration case, and blew out the crumbs inside the tin. Then he bent down and scraped the can across the ground to collect some sand. When it was half full, he tapped the can on the cargo deck to level it. "Sometimes we know we're going to stay overnight, and sometimes we don't." He bent down to the ground and stretched out his arm, can of sand in hand, underneath the belly of the Huey. For a few seconds all I could see of him was his legs as he pushed the can up to the fuel-drain valve. Soaking the sand with jet fuel, he pulled himself back up, carrying his fueled stove. "When we do know that we will be staying out like this before we leave for a mission, we plan for it." He sat the stove on the ground. "When we don't know we will be staying out like this, we don't." He reached back into the C-ration case and found another can of cookies. He opened the can with a few deft twists of the P-38. "This"-his brown eyes scanned the busy scene around him as if for the first time-"this is an example of one of those times we didn't plan ahead."

"Isn't it true that we could get mortared out here and lose most of our aircraft?" I was determined to get a logical explanation.

He had punched some triangular holes just beneath the top edge of the tin-can stove. This would let the flame burn when he placed the can of water on top. When he judged that all was in order, he placed the stove and tin of water on the ground about ten feet from the Huey and lighted the fire. A dark-orange flame swirled out of

the can, cooling to sooty smoke. He looked up from his hunkered-down position next to his creation and said, "Yes." Grabbing the tin of water by the folded-back lid, he gently lowered it to the stove. He kept it slightly offset, to let the flame rush up one side of the tin. Small bubbles formed almost immediately on the side where the flame danced.

"So how can they possibly justify our sitting out here like this?" I asked. "If we lost the ships out here, it would set us back for weeks or months. Being a little late in the morning, if it came to that, seems a lot less risky."

The water boiled. He picked the can off the flame, using a small piece of cardboard to protect his fingers from the hot lid. Placing the can carefully on the ground, he tore the top inch off the foil packet of instant coffee and dumped the granules into the water. The brown granules dissolved, and the smell wafted past my nose. "You're right," he said.

"So, why are we here?" I asked, perplexed.

Farris stirred in sugar and coffee creamer from their packets. Standing up, he held a piping-hot cup of coffee in his hands. He took a careful sip, breathing in sharply as he did. "I don't know." He smiled at me. Noticing the surprised look on my face, he said, "Here"-he held the coffee toward me-"Want a sip?"

The sun was setting behind the pass. I left Farris sipping his coffee and went looking for Resler.

I stopped back by my ship, where Leese was busy heating up his meal. Our case of C's was nearly empty except for some single cans of scrambled eggs, utensil packs, two or three minipacks of cigarettes, and about fifteen P-38 can openers. No complete meals. Leese was hunkered down talking WWII next to the Huey with his buddy, the ex- Luftwaffe pilot, Gotler. I told him I'd see him later, and left.

Gary had a much better selection of food-half a case of unopened, individual meals-so I had dinner with him.

"Let's see. We've got beef with noodles, beef stew, spaghetti with meatballs, boned chicken, or scrambled eggs," Gary said as he sorted through the box on the cargo deck.

"Boned chicken," I said.

"Right."

We sat eating as the last glow of light faded behind the pass. Mosquitoes began to gather, and Gary and I rolled our sleeves down to protect our arms. It was hot and muggy in the valley and it looked like rain.

We talked of war. I told him about how Leese had got out of the LZ with twelve grunts on board. He told me about taking a round through his canopy. "One minute, I'm flying along okay, and then the next split second a hole appears in the Plexiglas, right in front of my face." He stopped to point at his palm, as though it were the windshield. "No sound; it just suddenly appeared. For a second I didn't know if this was the last thing I was seeing or what. I felt like an asshole, but I asked Nate to tell me if he saw any blood coming from my face or anything. When he said no, I knew I was still alive. I know one thing now, for sure: If I do get hit in the head, I'll never know it. It's very quick."

Nate's face suddenly flashed into existence as he lit his pipe. He had walked up to us from somewhere out of the darkness. He squatted beside us and puffed loudly on his pipe. It smelled good. I made another mental note to quit smoking cigarettes and take up pipes. Without realizing it, I was smoking three and four packs a day.

His pipe bowl hissed. His sharp, triangular face with its small, serious mouth glowed periodically as he puffed. When the glow died down, his features disappeared and only the top of his hat and shoulders showed in the cloudy moonlight.

He continued to puff, not speaking. His presence had quieted Gary and me. His greater experience as a helicopter pilot somewhat intimidated us. An original member of the old 11th Air Assault, he had been shot down once.

"Gary tell you about the round we took today?" he finally said.

"Yeah, that was close," I said.

"Yes, it was. And they say things are going to get worse."

"They" again. "How do they know that?" I asked.

"Wendall read it in a book. Street Without Joy." Fucking Wendall again. "The guy who wrote it knows how the VC worked against the French. He says the Cav'll get it good when we move farther north." He puffed again, but the glow had burned down below the top crust of tobacco and there was only a hissing sound in the darkness.

"How does he say we'll get it?" Gary asked. I could hear him crumpling the trash from the dinner he had just finished. He snapped each plastic utensil.

"He says that when we get farther north, the landing zones are only big enough for one or two ships at a time. The Cong dig a hole in the LZ and cover it with brush. Then they leave one or two men hiding there during our prestrikes. They stay concealed in the hole during the strikes and get us as we come, with machine-gun fire up through the cockpit," Nate said calmly.

He seemed to have received special training somewhere that allowed him to live with such possibilities without a trace of fear. He even had a book to back his theories. He offered no solution to this trap, so I pushed for one.

"So, what can we do about it? How can we avoid the trap?"

"Nothing, except to keep your eyes out for a suspicious pile of brush in the LZ," he said, as if it were just one more critical maneuver we rank amateurs had yet to learn, as though the old salts already watched for those suspicious piles of brush.

I thought about the LZs, trying to remember the bushes. I remembered the confusion, the crackling door guns, the smell of gunpowder, the yells of the grunts, the radios going crazy. But bushes? Bushes were the furthest thing from my mind. How was I ever going to learn all this? What lesson would I miss that would cause my death?

"There's a lot to look for," I said, hoping someone would tell me not to worry about the bushes, that there was a trick to it.

"Yep," agreed Resler, "remember that giant bow and arrow, Bob?"

"Yes." I lit a cigarette from my third pack. "Tell Nate about it."

"Bob was in another ship, but we both saw it. We were about ready to land when a gunship pilot said he saw something suspicious."

"Was this last month?" Nate interrupted.

"Yes. When you told me about the bushes, I remembered that I didn't see what this gunship pilot was talking about. He finally made it clear when he asked us if we saw a wire or string going across the LZ. When he said that, I saw something, too." I could see Gary grinning as the moon shone briefly between some clouds. "The guy said, 'Watch this,' and dove toward the clearing while we circled. He fired a rocket into the middle of the clearing, and the blast broke the string. Suddenly a big pole, a sapling, shot across the clearing like a giant arrow. Whoosh! I couldn't believe it!" Gary and I laughed, but Nate just puffed away on his pipe.

He stood up suddenly, tapped the pipe on the heel of his hand, and stuffed it into his breast pocket, letting the bowl hang over the top. "Well, you guys are going to have to develop your observational abilities to match those of that gunship pilot if you want to make it through this war." With this gem of friendly advice, calculated to increase our feelings of inadequacy, he turned to leave. "Good night." He dissolved into the night to visit other friends.

I was getting the trash from my meal together when Gary said, "You know, there's something about that guy that makes me nervous. Do you think it's the pipe? My father never trusted anyone who smoked a pipe."

It rained all night. Four of us lay crammed into the Huey trying to sleep. The sliding doors were open to give us ventilation. I lay on my stomach on the deck, using my rolled-up fatigue shirt as a pillow, facing out the open door. Leese lay on his back on the other side with his fatigue jacket covering his chest and face. Reacher tossed and turned on the nylon sling bench at our feet. The gunner was half sitting, half lying against the aft bulkhead in the pocket behind his machine gun. His head was bent hard forward, forcing his chin into his chest. One would think that Reacher had the best bed. Not so. The bench was designed to hold four sets of buttocks, not a reclining body. Aluminum bars that would normally pass between sitting people forced themselves against the bones of anyone unlucky enough to have to sleep there. There was no alternative. The rain kept us inside because we had no tents.

I couldn't sleep. The air was heavy and dank. It rained only enough to keep the air saturated, not cool. Occasionally a drop would splash against the deck next to my face and spawn smaller drops that landed on my nose. I moved closer to the open doorway, hoping that the rain would scare away the mosquitoes. The GI bug repellant I had borrowed from Reacher worked well for a few minutes, but faded quickly.

"Hey, Reacher," I whispered, "you awake?"

"Uh-huh." His dreary voice barely contained the anguish of the battle he was losing with the bench.

"Let me have some more of your mosquito repellant."

"Uh-huh." He sat up in the moonlight and handed me the plastic bottle from his breast pocket and lay back down with a sigh.

There was barely enough for one application. I put a few drops on my palms and rubbed my hands together. I wiped my face. If I could keep them away from my face, I could get to sleep. I rubbed the excess on my hair and arms and looked over at Leese. He was lying under his shirt, asleep. In the partly cloudy moonlight, I checked my watch: 0200. I held the bottle near Reacher and said, "Here." Silently he reached up and took it.

When I put my head back down, I heard gunfire in the distance. It lasted only a minute and stopped. Probably a nervous grunt. Of course, it could be the beginning of an attack. I imagined how our position looked from above. The thirty-two dark shapes of our helicopters sat on the lighter-colored ground. On our perimeter, some grunts hid in their pup tents trying to sleep while others stared into the gray foliage watching. From my imaginary viewpoint, I couldn't decide which would be worse, a wave of VC swarming in on us or a mortar attack.

A mosquito bit me on the neck and brought me back to my damp aluminum deck and the drizzle. Goddamn their vicious little bug brains. I decided to think about hating mosquitoes. I hoped my thoughts would broadcast hatred and loathing enough to scare them away. I thought of torturing mosquitoes for a while, pulling out wings, squeezing heads, ripping off legs, and they stopped biting! They actually flew away. Had I made a great discovery? Would this stop our having to take malaria pills? Just hating mosquitoes intensely kept them away? But what would happen when I fell asleep? Would they come back? They would. Probably with reinforcements, too. The thing to do, I reasoned, was to call a meeting, a rally, and concentrate on hating mosquitoes, en masse, all at once. We could corral them into one big mass of frightened bugs. I saw myself reaching into that mass and grabbing a big handful and squeezing. Their screams of horror and cries for mercy only brought a smile to my face. I reached for another handful.

I smelled coffee. Leese was up. I sat up to see where he was. Reacher was gone too. My watch said 0530. I blinked for a minute while my brain tried to join me in getting awake. My face itched. My hands itched. The mosquitoes had won.

Leese squatted on the ground on his side of the Huey, boiling water. Beyond him, I could see the camp coming alive. Little orange fires flickered, and gray shapes moved among the dull-green helicopters in the morning haze.

I rolled out on my side, walked around to join Leese, and in a few minutes I had my own coffee brewing. By 0700 we had all eaten, had coffee and cigarettes, preflighted the helicopters, and were ready to get the hell out of there. Three hours later, the crews were still hanging around their Hueys, sacking out if they could, or staring bleary-eyed at nothing, like me.

Farris and Shaker called us together for a briefing.

The action in Happy Valley had disappeared. The VC had slipped away in the night. The fifty-calibers had stopped firing, too. If they had been destroyed, there was no evidence on the ground, according to the grunts. Action was postponed until another day.

Leese and I, along with seven other ships, were to spend the day flying ass-and-trash (people and equipment) around the division. The rest of the gaggle were going home to dig more ditches and haul more stumps.

It was all good news to me. I hoped the VC kept right on going to wherever they were going. And I would rather do anything than chop at stumps that were bigger across than a small crowd.

It was almost dark enough to use the landing light when we finished resupplying the patrols. I hovered over the uneven ground of row three looking for an empty pad to park. I passed some spots marked for another company. They had begun painting unit numbers on pieces of PSP at the head of each slot. When I found an empty spot belonging to us, it was half a mile from our company area.

Leese had called operations on the way in, and they sent a small truck to pick us up. We were the last ship in the company to get back, according to the driver.

It was well past sunset, but a soft glow still drifted in the west. The cool light glistened off the mud-slick road. The four of us sat under the canvas covering in the back of the truck, watching the Hueys pass by as the truck labored through the mud.

When the truck stopped in front of operations, we got out and said good-bye to Reacher and the gunner as they took the two machine guns from our ship back to the armory tent. Leese and I went to the operations tent to drop off the dash-twelve page from the log book. Operations used that page to record the hours flown by the pilots, crew, and aircraft.

"Welcome back, late ones," said Captain Owens snidely.

"We're not late," said Leese. "It took this long to finish."

"Just kidding, Ron," Owens said without a smile.

Leese handed the operations officer our dash-twelve. "I guess I'm just tired."

"We'll both feel a lot better after some hot chow," I said.

"Ah," Owens said. "The mess tent closed an hour ago." He looked uneasy.

"Did the cook save us something?" Leese asked.

"Have to check with him," said Owens lamely. He had forgotten to tell the cook to save some food for us, but he did not offer an apology. We glared. If only he would admit that he'd made a mistake, but he was learning to be defensive. In a unit of assault pilots, he and his partner, Mr. White, were the only two pilots not flying combat missions.

The next morning, we got a particularly depressing sample of how poorly our intelligence-gathering system worked. Leese and I flew the last ship in a formation of sixteen slicks. The whole battalion was in the air, loaded with troops to surround a company of VC who, according to our intelligence branch, were on their way across Happy Valley to Bong Son Valley, on the coast.

Once over the pass, we turned north up the valley. After twenty miles, the three slick-ship companies separated, to land at different places around the target. Our gunship company split up in three groups to cover us.

While the formation let down for the approach, I looked ahead to find the LZ. No trees or foothills this time; it was all cleared land, dry rice paddies, and sandy, weed-patched fields. It was difficult to believe that a company of VC could be hidden there.

The lead ships got closer, and their door gunners started firing. Their tracers plunged to the earth at nothing I could see.

About a mile from a solitary tree and a hundred feet off the ground, I saw two figures tearing across the sandy field toward the tree. More than thirty machine guns were trying to hit them.

When I was close enough to see the sand puffing up at their heels, one of them dropped his rifle and turned around to get it. He looked up frantically. The sky was filled with tracers, all coming at him. As he reached for his rifle, the sand boiled at

his feet and he continued down, falling through the turmoil of bullets. He must have been dead before he hit the ground.

His terrified companion was still running for his life. As we closed in, there were even more machine guns following him, chattering. I watched amazed as the bullets churned all around the running man. "Give up!" I yelled. "Give up, you dumb motherfucker!" Realizing that he would not make it to the tree, he dove for the only cover available, a shallow depression in the sand. Door gunners all around us were pulverizing the ground around him, but Leese had not given our gunners permission to fire. That dumb fucking gook, the bravest man I had ever seen, rolled over with his rifle aimed high to take on our entire air-assault battalion, machine guns blazing. He might have got off one or two shots before he was torn to pieces.

The final score for that mission? Those two VC. The intelligence branch must have read their maps upside down. Connors suggested that the intelligence branch was getting its information from smuggled Chinese fortune cookies.

In a letter I wrote to Patience on October 15, I told about Nate getting shot down for his second time. He and Kaiser were on an ass-and-trash mission along Route 19 when a lucky shot into the engine brought them down. Riker and Gotler immediately followed them down to the road and picked them up. Before they took off, they stripped the downed Huey of its radios and guns to keep them out of the VC's growing collection of American supplies. Nate looked proud, puffing on his pipe as he told us about his adventure. Once again, he had walked away from near disaster. Everybody agreed that it might have been a different story if the other ship hadn't been with him. I resolved to fly higher in the secure area.

I also mentioned-or rather complained bitterly-that I had been bumped from a planned one-day rest and recuperation (R&R) to Saigon. The plan was that everybody would get a chance to visit Saigon at least once when a ship needed work that the Cav couldn't handle. By rotating the job of flying these ships to the big depot at Ton Son Nhut air base in Saigon, everyone could make a trip sometime during his tour. These trips lasted anywhere from one to three days.

My name had come up for the next trip. A one-day R&R. I was overjoyed and spent a couple of hours gathering my stuff together, getting Marston to trim my hair,

and compiling a shopping list of requests from my tent. I felt great about getting away from the Cav, even if for only one day.

The plan changed. The trip was extended to three days. It was felt by somebody that it was a waste to give a three-day trip to a brand-new warrant officer, so the ship was taken instead by two captains. Farris was angry about the sudden change in crews. Williams, the man I had impressed by shooting out the omni-gauge, probably made the decision.

While the two captains took off, I grabbed an ax and joined the work crew on the Golf Course. My opinion of our company commander was deteriorating.

On October 17 I was declared right-seat qualified by Williams. Right-seat qualified meant that I was now considered skilled enough in the Huey and air-assault operations to be an aircraft commander. A regular old salt, almost. For the rest of the day I didn't even notice the mud as I slogged around the company area.

Another maintenance R&R trip to Saigon came up, and this time Riker and I were scheduled to go. A three-day trip.

Rather than fly directly to Saigon, over 250 miles of VC territory in a sick Huey, we first flew to Qui Nhon and turned south to fly down the coast to Vung Tau. From there it was only twenty miles to the big city.

We flew at 5000 feet, where the air was cool and the bullets couldn't reach, a beautiful twoand-a-half-hour flight. We were both pretty excited about visiting Saigon, country boys coming in to see the big time. The crew chief and gunner were also happy. We all cracked jokes over the intercom and talked about what we were going to do. At times like this, even the Cav seemed okay.

As we cruised low level over the city toward Ton Son Nhut, Saigon was a sea of tin roofs that stretched for miles. People below us waved as we soared only a hundred feet above their huts and gardens.

"See that?" I said. "See those people waving?"

"What about it?" said Riker.

"They are obviously happy to see us. No doubt they've heard all about us working and fighting our asses off in the highlands. No doubt they'll have a reception of happy, grateful people waiting for us when we arnve.

"No doubt," Riker said, shaking his head.

We left the Huey at the maintenance depot, jumped into a cab, and ogled the scenery on the way into town. The driver was obviously an ex-kamikaze pilot. His technique for passing cars was to lay on the horn, swing out into the other lane, and persevere. Etiquette demanded that under no circumstances would he change his mind.

We got a hotel room that featured peeling paint, no windows, and a john in the shower stall. This was fine compared to the moldy tents and dirt floors at tent city.

We rushed through quick showers and changed into wrinkled civilian clothes. No uniforms off duty. I had a pair of tan cotton pants and a green checkered shirt. A loose-fitting, wrinkled white shirt emphasized Len's scrawny build and freckled complexion. It was the first time we had worn anything but fatigues for two months. We looked it, too.

"Shall we go see what we can see?" I said.

"We shall," said Len.

I opened the door as a young second lieutenant walked by. He stopped, and without saying anything, he leaned against the door jamb and looked around inside.

"Pretty bad room," he said.

"You don't like the hotel?" I asked.

"No, it's not that." He smiled. "I live here. I've just never seen this room before. Really tacky."

"Seems fine to me," Riker defended.

"Well, maybe for a one- nighter, or for the enlisted. But it's not the kind of place I would normally buy."

"Buy?" I asked.

"Yeah. I buy and lease hotels and apartment buildings for the army. I'm a real-estate officer."

"Real-estate officer?" I was amazed.

"Sure," he said. "Somebody has to do it... .You guys from the Cav?"

I wondered if he noticed the horse patches on our fatigues inside.

"Yeah, how did you know?" asked Riker.

"I checked the register." He grinned. "I bet you guys are really seeing some action up there in the highlands. We hear all about the Cav down here. It's really boring here. Never any action."

He was dressed in starched jungle fatigues and polished jungle boots. We didn't have either of these, because there was a shortage. My regular boots were rotting off my feet, so I was looking for a new pair.

"Can you buy fatigues and boots in Saigon?" I asked.

"Buy?" He looked at me, puzzled. "I guess so, but my stuff is issue. Don't you all have jungle gear? The Cav?" He paused. "Come downstairs to my room and I'll show you something. You're on the way out, aren't you?"

Down in his room, we saw twelve sets of jungle fatigues carefully spaced on his clothes rod, as neat as a closet in officer's candidate school. Two pairs of jungle boots sat on the floor beneath them.

"You were issued all this stuff?" My feelings were obvious. "Sure. As far as I know, we have more than we need. I don't understand why you don't have this stuff at the Cav. I'm sure you'll get it soon." He smiled, but neither of us smiled back. "Anyway, don't you think this room is nicer than the one you got? Does yours have a john or a squat hole?"

"It's got a john in the shower stall," I said.

"Well, that's something. I hate to use those damn squat holes. Don't you?" he asked. I hadn't used one yet, so I didn't know.

"Well," I said, "we're used to using outside latrines."

"Yeah," Riker interrupted, "we shit in sawed-off 55-gallon oil drums. When they're full, we burn the shit with jet fuel. Smells bad."

"Damn." He was impressed. "You guys are really roughing it. I can't tell you how much I envy you. Action. Really getting out there and doing it." He paused. "Well," he continued, "somebody has to be down here doing the bullshit."

"Assholes better not send any more of us to Saigon!" Len exclaimed outside the hotel. "If they do, the word about this fake fucking shortage is going to get back to the suckers!"

"That's right!" I said. "They'll have division-wide riots, and everybody will quit." I started laughing. "I know I'll quit. Hell, I'll quit right now just to save the trouble of going back and starting the riots."

"Me too!" yelled Riker. "I quit!" We were both laughing. Vietnamese passed by us on the sidewalk, smiling nervously at what I'm sure they thought were two drunken, possibly berserk Americans. Exhilaration overcame us, and as we hurried to the street corner where the pedicabs waited, we sang, "We quit because we quit, because we quit, because we quit .. ." until we sat down in the back of one of the bicycle-powered cabs.

Len gave the driver a piece of paper with the name of the hotel where we could find an officers' club. I think it was the International Hotel. The young pedicab operator looked at the paper and nodded.

He pedaled tirelessly, his ass never once touching the bicycle seat. "Must be in great shape," I said. "Probably a VC by night." A blue U.S. Air Force bus plowed by. It had heavy wire screens installed over each window.

"So you can't toss a grenade inside," said Riker.

Suddenly I realized how easy it would be for someone to run up be-side us and toss one in the cab seat. It gave me a case of nerves. Too many people to guard against. I was about ready to bail out of this Oriental express when the VC up front turned around, smiling. We had stopped. Obviously he had read my mind.

"Da wa no hai," he said, or something like that. I translated it as "Ah so, jai, you die now!" Actually, it meant that we had arrived. Len and I got out and paid him. He took our money and pedaled off, to buy some ammo, no doubt.

We passed ARYN MPs at the front door. After a leisurely elevator ride we found ourselves under the darkening sky on the penthouse patio at the top of the hotel. Parts of the hotel served as billets for American officers stationed here, and this roof garden was part of their club. The beautiful Saigon night spread out beyond the low parapet.

The bar served any drink you could name, made with American booze for a quarter. Civilians and soldiers mixed with round-eyed ladies from somewhere. They drank heavily and talked loudly. Their voices made me nervous. Weren't they worried that they might draw fire with their boisterousness?

As the bourbon flowed into my bloodstream, I began to warm to the occasion. Drunk enough to relax and be hungry, Riker and I got a table overlooking the city. We had rare sirloin and baked potatoes with sour cream served with a huge tossed salad of crispy fresh lettuce and juicy tomatoes that might have been grown on a farm near my hometown in Florida.

The events of the rest of the night are lost to me. I know that both of us drank too much. Actually, it must have been me who drank to much, because Riker at least knew how to get back to the room.

Starting very late the next morning, we went to the navy BX to pick up stuff for the guys back at camp. The Saigon warriors had a complete department store. The stuff for sale here was actually better and cheaper than the merchandise sold at PXs in America-Nikon cameras for $150. A Roberts tape recorder cost $120. There were clothes, tools, canned food, books, even cases of Kotex.

Riker suggested that evening that we go back to the restaurant I had enjoyed so much last night.

"Last night?" I didn't know what he was talking about.

"Sure. Don't you remember the snails you had?"

"I have never eaten snails," I announced. But I was beginning to have a vague recollection.

"Well, you had about three dozen last night. Besides, there's a girl there who loves you."

"A girl? Hey, listen, Len, I'm a married man."

"So am I." He grinned. "But I still get horny away from home. Besides, you don't have to fuck 'em, you know. It's nice to just sit and talk to a girl for a change."

After dinner that evening, I began to feel very sick. By midnight I was doubled over. Len took me to the navy hospital, where they treated me for dysentery. I spent the remaining twenty-four hours of the vacation sick in bed.

The following morning I sat in our Huey with a case of the blahs. I rode as a front-seat passenger while Len flew and I watched with growing apprehension the tin roofs thinning into rice paddies and jungles as we headed back to the highlands and the Cav.

On October 22 a news magazine ran a boldly optimistic cover story about how things were coming along in Vietnam. The magazine came out while Len and I were in Saigon. Everybody read it. The article summarized for us and the folks back home just how well things in Vietnam were going. Three months before, the Viet Cong had been ready to move in for the kill, and South Vietnam was ready to quit.

But now, South Vietnam was brimming over with confidence, nearly giddy with pride and power, an incredible change from the summer be-fore. The reason for this remarkable turnabout was one of the fastest and largest military expansions in the history of warfare. Once again I read about how we had chopped the brush and stumps with machetes so that our choppers would not cause dust storms on the heliport. So that we wouldn't get the feeling that we were training for jobs with the South Vietnam Parks Department, they mentioned that 2500 of us were fighting in Happy Valley. The article closed with the reproval that it was the Communists who picked South Vietnam as the first domino in the string that was Southeast Asia. Now, it claimed, they were having second thoughts. The United States had met the challenge, and not just South Vietnam but all of Southeast Asia would eventually be strengthened by the remarkable and still-growing presence of American know-how, hardware, and lives. Even the mundane act of troops unloading at Qui Nhon was transformed in the article into waves of tough, scrappy GIs pouring ashore from fleets of troopships.

The article did not say a word about our effectiveness. With all our mobility, the VC still called the shots. We fought on their terms.

The slant of the article created an impression, and the impression was hard to forget. Even I believed that it must be only the Cav that was having problems, that things in general were looking up.

At about the same time the article was published, Pleime, a tiny fort sixty miles to the west of us, in Ia Drang valley, was under a siege that had begun on October 19. Although the attack seemed relatively insignificant at the time, it would be the event that would soon bring the Cav and the North Vietnamese regulars together for the biggest battle yet.

John Hall spent most of his evenings getting drunk with Jim Storter. But, unlike Jim, John was never found sleeping it off in a wall locker or a cardboard box in the

supply tent. They drank for different reasons. Storter took solace in sauce because his wife was screwing around in the States while the VC were trying to kill him here. John's problems were all in Vietnam. He believed that the Cav was taking unnecessary chances with his life to prove that air-assault techniques really worked. He had decided after the first few missions that if the VC didn't kill him, the Cav would.

"We shouldn't be landing in hot LZs, Mason." John sat against the tent pole one night at my end of the tent. "In the Eleventh Air Assault, we were taught to move troops and supplies from one secured LZ to the next. We're landing in places so hot now that you'd think we were flying armored fortresses or something. Hell, we don't even have chest protectors."

"How do we avoid the hot LZs?" I asked.

"By landing the troops near the fight, not in the middle of it. It's no better for them to land in the thick of it than it is for us."

"They already seem to know where we will land," I said. "Did you see the size of those stakes in the last LZ?" We had landed in an LZ that had hundreds of ten-foot stakes in it. The same clearing had been empty the day before. "How can we be sure they don't pick up on our decision to land farther away?"

John took a slug of Scotch from his canteen and offered me some. I declined. "The way I see it, the VC are at spot X. Now, while they're there, they know the Americans can land all around them at any minute. So the VC commander, while at spot X, has some of his men stand guard at all the nearby clearings where he thinks we can land. He can even start a fight to draw us into a trap. It's a good strategy. If we attack him, he gets a chance to ambush us when we're the most vulnerable, in the helicopter."

"Okay," I said. "But, like I said before, if he knows where we'll be landing, as they obviously did yesterday, we'll always be landing in hot LZs unless we find the source of their information."

"Spies?"

"Sure," I said. "Did you ever ask one of those smiling interpreters you see running around sometimes to show you his South Vietnamese Good Guy card? I mean, all our plans have to be coordinated with the Vietnamese. That means they have to be

translated and passed on to the gooks. So where do you think the leak is? The Pentagon?

John took another belt of whiskey. "It seems hopeless. If we aren't able, with all our might, to get into landing zones without the VC knowing about it beforehand, what can we do? We should be out there marching, taking real estate and keeping it. Fuck taking little landing zones over and over again." He stood up suddenly. "Fuck it!" His anger and disappointment showed on his face.

"It's not that bad, John. Things are looking up. This war could end on our tour." I tried joking to cheer him up. "The press says we're going to win. When the gooks get that last issue, they'll roll over and quit. Nobody fucks with the press."

He smiled, darkly. My best lines were wasted. "Well, Mason, I'm going now." He turned to leave, but stopped. "Listen, if you ever want to sell your derringer, I'll buy it."

Even John started smiling the next day. We flew a lift to Happy Valley without even sniper fire. Charlie was not responding, almost as though he had read that article. We decided that we had won in Happy Valley.

As the threat of death seemed to subside, we got cocky. We flew around the division, Route 19, and most of Happy Valley without getting shot at. The VC had been outclassed by our power, seen the light, and would soon be giving up. I was feeling good. I was right-seat qualified, and battle-tested (I thought), and the VC were giving up. I felt my confidence soaring because I was a member of the team and the team was winning.

I was so happy about maybe living through this war that when we had to scramble just before dinner that night, it didn't bother me. In fact, when I got back from the screwed-up mission, I wrote Patience an exuberant letter. I submit it here as a record of my last happy letter from Vietnam.

[October 23]

We had an alert to pick up some troops as soon as possible at about two minutes before evening chow. We all ran out to the aircraft thrashing through the mud screaming, "Where's my aircraft? Where are we going? What's the freqs? Gosh, I'm

getting all muddy!" and other confused remarks because somebody screamed fly and didn't say why.

With the thought in mind that the first one airborne is the leader, we hurtled into the air like a swarm of blind bugs and flew off into the sunset.

The leader called for an aircraft to guide him to the area and followed the wrong one. After we landed in the wrong LZ, the leader discovered his mistake and zipped off to find the right place. Since he didn't bother to say not to on the radio, all the rest of us zipped off with him. It's rather hard to appreciate the sight of seven helicopters trying to fly formation on a leader who thinks he's alone unless you've done it!

Hooray! We found the right place! Naturally since it was an emergency, we sat on the ground for half an hour waiting for the "eager, waiting" troops.

While waiting, the happy, boisterous company pilots all gathered together and sang:

(The Fuckees Hymn)
He stood on the steeple
And pissed on the people
But the people couldn't
Piss on him.
Amen

After this rousing chorus we grabbed our steeds and leaped into the air, pressing onward, ever onward in the true flying horseshit tradition!

We didn't really sing that song while on the mission, but we did when we got back that night. It was the company song from the old days.

The siege of Pleime was still going strong in Ia Drang valley, but in our battalion nothing was happening. You would think that this lack of combat while we just flew ass-and-trash around camp would please us no end. But as the period of relative calm continued, it seemed to last an eternity. It wasn't that we wanted to fight so much; it was that if there was no fighting to do, let's go home.

As the assaults became routine, even the grunts got lax. As we loaded up for one mission, a grunt got on board carrying an M-79 grenade launcher. He slammed the butt of the weapon on my cargo deck and the thing went off. The grenade went up through the roof of my Huey, up through the spinning rotor blades. After several seconds, it fell back down through the blades and landed next to the ship five feet from my door. It didn't go off. When I turned around to yell at the dumb grunt, all I could see was me holding a smoking .45 with the same sick smile on my face. However, Resler was with me, and he yelled at the guy. An armorer later explained to me that the grenade had to travel a few feet before it spun enough to arm itself. Its hitting the roof so soon had stopped the process. Nevertheless, from that moment on I had all M-79s checked for safeties on before I would allow them to board.

We took these troops to Lima for the umpteenth grouping for the umpteenth mission up Happy Valley. They got out, and we got orders to haul ammunition, fuel, and food for our infantry. Many of the loads were rigged as sling loads, so I got some practice. I had sling-loaded stumps once with Connors.

"Okay, they've got the lines on the mule. Let's go," said Leese. (A "mule" was a small, four-wheel-drive vehicle.)

I picked the ship up to a high hover about twenty-five feet above the dry rice paddies. One grunt stood on top of the mule and held a loop attached to four support lines over his head. Another grunt stood fifty feet beyond him to direct me as I approached. I was flying from the left seat. I hovered forward, and the man holding the loop disappeared between my feet as I moved over him. The swirling wind from my rotors whipped the fatigues of interested watchers to a blur. With hand signals he apparently made up as he went along, the guide out front tried to shepherd our whirling beast to squat above the mule.

"Did he touch his nose?" I yelled. "What the fuck does touching his nose mean?" I wanted to show Leese that I knew what I was doing.

"It's all right, Bob. You're lined up fine," said Leese.

"Reacher, lean out and tell me what the fuck's going on. That ass-hole looks like he's conducting a symphony!" I said.

"Yes, sir." Reacher lay down on his stomach and pushed the top half of his body out over the edge of the deck, holding on to his monkey strap. "About three feet left and five down."

"Look at him. Now he's telling me to cut power!" The idiot guide was drawing his hand across his throat.

"You're far enough down. Just a couple of feet to the left," Reacher instructed. "There. They put it on the hook." Meanwhile, the guide became so interested in the hookup, he simply watched.

I pulled enough collective pitch to take up the slack and let the Huey pull itself to the point of equal tension on the four lines above the load. From there, I increased pitch gently to pull the thousand-pound mule into the air. As the weight transferred to the Huey, the increased pitch of the blades slapped the air loudly. With the load off the ground, the instruments showed that I had enough margin of power for takeoff. The cyclic felt stiff as I corrected for drift.

The fuselage of a helicopter in a hover is like a weight at the bottom of a pendulum, the top being where the mast joins the rotor hub. The addition of a sling load makes it a sort of compound pendulum. Coordinating the movements of the two takes practice. Pushing the cyclic forward, for example, causes the rotor disk to tilt forward, pulling the fuselage along after the rotors like a rock on the end of a string. With the sling load hooked up, the swing of the fuselage is slowed by the inertia of the attached load. The helicopter acts like it doesn't want to move forward. There's a danger at this point that the pilot will apply even more forward cyclic to overcome this resistance. When the momentum of the two pendulums coincides, the ship will be nose low and sinking. Pulling back quickly to correct for this causes the fuselage to swing back first, then the load, each at its own rate. When everything stops tugging weirdly at the ship, it'll be moving too slowly and can stall back to the ground. All this means that when I started to move forward for takeoff, I wanted to keep going.

"Jesus, I'm up here, twenty feet over his head, and he's signaling me to come to a hover!" I was getting ready to land and go choke the guide.

"The load is clear, sir," said Reacher.

I moved slowly forward so as not to antagonize the two pendulums. The guide, however, stood his ground, frantically giving me unrecognizable signs. The heavy load swung toward him, accelerating. I was hoping to hit him, but he dove clear at the last moment.

As we climbed up, Leese said, "Disarm," and reached up to the overhead panel and flipped off the circuit breaker for the electrical hook release. We kept it on when we were close to the ground because the pilot could hit a switch on the cyclic control grip to drop the load in a hurry. Airborne, the hook was disarmed to prevent it from releasing itself accidentally, which it occasionally did. Somebody in our company had dropped a mule from 3000 feet the day before, and the grunts were still pissed about it. The thing looked as though it had been dug out of a King Kong footprint.

I could feel the tugging as the mule fought the wind while I flew back to the Golf Course. For the landing, all I had to remember was to start the deceleration early and keep the ship high. Leese armed the release. I settled into a high hover with the mule ten feet off the ground and slowly approached the ground guide at the maintenance depot. I watched him suspiciously, but he knew what he was doing. As I felt the mule touch, he signaled to release, and I pushed the button on the grip that caused the belly hook to release the lines. The Huey lunged toward the sky when the load released, and I let it go, pulling in even more power to urge it up to a nearly vertical climb, turning to the right.

"Cowboy," said Leese, but when I looked over to him, he was smiling.

The combat lull continued, but I was still getting plenty of flight time. Eight or nine hours a day was typical. I could've stayed out longer because of the unhappiness at tent city. Boredom was breeding widespread depression. With apparently no one to fight, the Cav was just twenty thousand men sitting in the middle of Vietnam in their mildewing tents, wondering why they were here.

It didn't help that the anti-Vietnam-war demonstrators were becoming prominent in the news. With the company in such a black mood, the protesters' remarks were so much salt in our wounds. No one likes being the fool. Especially if he finds himself risking his life to be one.

"I think I'd rather kill one of those fuckheads than a goddamn gook!" yelled Connors. He threw a magazine on the ground inside our tent. "Cocksuckers think they know everything! Did you read that?" He spoke to no one in particular. It was late, and I was up, writing a letter on my cot. "That asshole says that Ho Chi Minh was sold out by the Americans! He says that gook was once our ally and that we let a British colonel turn South Vietnam back to the French!" He stopped. I looked over.

He sat on his cot in his shorts with a beer in his hand, staring angrily at the canvas wall behind me. His face calmed when he saw me. "You ever hear that before, Mason?"

"That was the first time," I said.

"Do you think it's true?" he pleaded. To him, I was an educated man, having been to college for two years.

"No," I said.

The siege of Pleime in the Ia Drang valley ended on October 27. For more than a week the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) units had launched one fanatical attack after the other. Six thousand uniformed regulars hit the tiny fort, twenty miles from the Cambodian border, with waves of men and mortars and recoilless rifles. They fought from as close as forty yards away, using trenches they had secretly installed under the advisers' noses weeks before. Inside the triangular compound, hundreds of mercenaries from the Montagnard tribes fought under the leadership of the Special Forces advisers, the Green Berets. From II Corps headquarters, thirty miles north at Pleiku, a relief force of tanks, artillery, and a thousand ARVN infantrymen was sent. Some ships from another assault company in the Cav lifted in 250 South Vietnamese Rangers. Then our air force bombed and strafed. In six hundred sorties, twenty planes were hit and three were shot down. A helicopter was downed, and an American sergeant was killed trying to get to it. When supplies ran low inside, the air force dropped pallets of food and ammunition into the compound. Two men were killed when one pallet landed on them. Another pallet went through the mess-hall roof.

It ended with heavy losses to the enemy and, finally, their retreat. Time gave us some of the credit for scaring them away. "As elements of the U.S. First Cavalry swarmed in by low-flying helicopter, the Viet Minh faded reluctantly away from Pleime. 'They're headed west, straight for Cambodia,' groaned one Aircav platoon leader. 'I suppose we'll have to chase the bastards all the way there.'"

He was right.

End Chickenhawk sampler. Chickenhawk is published by Penguin and is available at most libraries and bookstores.