

Charles Hayes
You'll Be Sorry

After passing over the coastal mountains along the South China Sea we went into a sudden dive, sending my stomach up to my throat. Out the small bulkhead window the jungle and bamboo villages suddenly grew larger until, just as suddenly, we pulled up. Palm trees flashed by just below our wings. After checking my crotch for wetness, I watched the palm trees give way to black tarmac. We landed hard and slowed just enough to exit the runway and taxi to a large metal hangar. As if this was all completely normal, a colorfully dressed stewardess appeared at the front of the cabin and welcomed us to the busiest airport in the world, Da Nang, Vietnam.



I came from one of the many sweeps for poor white trash and blacks conducted throughout Southern Appalachia to feed the Vietnam war. Having no clout nor any real means to get out of the poverty of the hills or avoid the draft, I was easy prey for the "Uncle Sam Wants You" roughriders at my local draft board.

I reported for induction into the Army and the sergeant in charge told me that the Marines were short on men. He said that if I agreed to join them for 3 years I wouldn't have to go to Vietnam. Otherwise, he said that I would be beating the Vietnam bush within 3 months. I fell for the spiel, beginning a journey that still quickly took me to Vietnam. Taking a last look back at the pretty stewardess standing in the exit doorway I said my goodbyes to the world.

The first thing I noticed after those goodbyes was the heat coming from all directions as it poured down and was reflected back by everything it touched. Everyone seemed to be in motion as if the sun demanded it in order to avoid being cooked dry by its wash.

My group was quickly met by a gunnery sergeant as he hopped out of a jeep, gathered us together, and herded us toward our next staging area. All along the hot tarmac I could see camouflaged jets landing and taking off. The same for helicopters. It was one big beehive of sweat, flashing afterburners, and noise.

Soon we passed another group of marines peering at us through a chain link fence just off one side of the tarmac. Looking very much out of place amongst all the purposeful activity and uniform dress, they wore jungle fatigues and floppy bush hats. Their jungle boots were scuffed tan from wear and never having seen any polish. Gaunt yellowish faces, colored by the anti-malaria pills, looked out from masses of long hair and mustaches. But it was their eyes and demeanor that really set them apart and belied their youth as they amused themselves, watching the new guys as if watching their favorite animals at the zoo. Pressed up against the links in the fence, like some band of detainees curtailed off from the more respectable lots of society, their looks unsettled me in a way that's hard to explain. Like I was part of some exhibition of the condemned. I wanted to ignore them but couldn't help staring back. Reviewing their faces, I saw that most seemed to be there just for the sake of being there. No particu-

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

lar reason or motivation registered on their visages, just that they were there and accounted for, to hell with anything more definitive than that. That was until I met the eyes of one a little taller and dirtier than the rest. With no amusement reflected in his dark eyes, he sang out in a clear lilting voice without a hint of comedy, "You'll..... be..... sor.....ry." The others along the fence only stared on as if the tone of his prediction rang with an air that some things just were ...and not one of them doubted it.

We eventually got parked in a huge hanger and over the next few hours we were in turn sent out over Vietnam far and wide to replace those who were going home, or who had been killed or wounded. When it came to my turn I was sent only a few miles southwest of the air strip.



I was very much welcomed when my jeep arrived at my new unit. No predictions of sorrow were heard for me who had come to freshen up this unit. Fresh newbies generally meant a little less hazard for those trying to get out of the Nam someday other than a crate or a hospital plane. Making it through that year and getting the hell out of there was what it was all about. Not complicated at all I soon figured as I settled in and started ticking the days until I could get back to the world. Nor was it complicated or long before I got my first taste of the war, this cherry from the hillbilly country of West Virginia.



As the pop flare drifted to earth a ghostly light was cast over the green wet terrain beyond the perimeter of the 1st support battalion, 1st Marines. Those along the bunker line facing the base of Hill 821 peered through the misty monsoon rains from underneath ponchos and anything else that might help them find a little comfort in the muddy trench. Assigned to the communications section of H&S Company, I was catching more than my share of perimeter duty. Since I was the cherry of the outfit that was nothing unusual in the Nam but it sure as hell had little to do with repairing radios which was my MOS or military occupational specialty. After scanning the dark perimeter I sloshed a couple of steps along the trench and entered a bagged and roofed bunker where I had unloaded my PRC-25 radio pack at midnight. A couple of waterlogged grunts or infantrymen from the security platoon were wrapped in their ponchos and setting on ammo crates trying to stay dry and avoid the chill of the monsoon season. I felt no pity for them, I was cold and soaked too.

"How come you guys aren't in position?"

"Aw hell, give us a break corporal, there ain't nothing out there but maybe a rock ape or two," one of them said, "you ain't been here long enough to know."

"I been here long enough to know that if you two don't get back to your positions you'll find out that you're not as short as you think you are."

If it's anything most marines try to avoid it's having to stay in Vietnam past their rotation date on a legal hold because of some personal screw up. So both grunts reluctantly picked up their gear and went back down the bunker line to their positions.

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

I knew I had a lot to learn and I hated to push seasoned grunts but I had to make a situation report and how the hell could I do that with two posts vacant.

I picked up the radio handset, keyed it, and quietly said, "Yankee one, yankee 3, sit-rep all secure, over."

"Three, one, roger, out," came the reply.

Back outside the bunker under the constant rain I resumed my watch and tried to shelter my M-16 rifle as much as possible. Rifles could be tricky enough about jamming even when in good condition but so far I had not had any trouble with mine. It appeared that the government had finally gotten the problem fixed after lots of young men had died and were found with a jammed rifle in their hands. Even then there was no hurry it seemed, just another poor dumb son of a bitch dying for his country as General Patton had so eloquently once put it.

As the descending flare was about to hit the ground and die I reached into my cargo pocket, removed another one and slammed the base of it with the heel of my hand. A whooshing sound traveled skyward followed by the loud pop of the illumination chute and again the barren kill zone beyond the concertina wire lit up. Scanning the kill zone for movement, I wondered what was really going on in Vietnam. What I was seeing was not jiving with what I had heard.

Ducking down in the trench, I lit a cigarette, cupped my hand around the glowing ash, and smoked. My watch told me that soon my shift would be over and I could make chow before hitting the rack. The patrol should be on its way back by now according to the checkpoints that I heard over the radio. Looking in the direction from which I knew they would come, I could see the wooden poles used to open the wire and the glowing eyes of the sentry dog staked out there, but not much else. Suddenly, about 200 meters in that same direction I heard the ack-ack-ack and saw the green tracers of enemy AK-47 fire. It was immediately followed by the rapid burst and red tracers of several M-16s returning fire. The booms of the 12 gauge double ought bush gun could also be heard. From the listening posts the radio net came alive with contact reports. With the radio now on my back, I logged in, rushed down the bunker line, and passed the word to the grunts who were already standing by. After another burst of M-16 fire mixed with M-79 grenade launcher explosions there was a lull in the action. Everyone on the radio net was instructed to remain in place and wait for further word.

As the siren atop the COC or Commanding Officer's Communication bunker in the rear sounded the trench line began to fill up with marines. In the distance I could hear the funny sounding alarm of the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) 155 Howitzers and knew that they too were bee hiving and lowering the big guns. The once dark sky was now full of the sound and illumination of what seemed like a hundred pop flares going off as we all waited, staring out at that cleared ground beyond the wire.

Shortly, a helicopter gun ship showed up and mini gunned the area with a curtain of lead that looked like one big red screen descending to the ground from the dark sky above the flares. We called them spooky gun-

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

ships and they could put a round into every square foot of a football field sized area in less than 30 seconds. Nothing above ground could withstand such withering fire. An eerie quietness took hold, broken only by the zipping sound of the spooky mini guns as the terrain was raked with lead. Earthbound marines looked skyward as if it were Zeus or some other God practicing his art from above.

When the chopper ceased fire and left, dawn broke so quickly it was almost like waking up from a dream. Colonel Blevins, the battalion CO, was now on the line and I could hear his operator, another com section marine named Tim, relaying orders for the patrol to break cover, reconnoiter for killed and wounded, and come in.

Usually no higher than a sergeant led patrols but it was Lt. Stansworth, the security platoon CO, leading this time and apparently he had been wounded by the first volley of AK fire. Word was that it was only superficial, having grazed his shoulder. Stansworth, a former force recon marine, was about as gung ho as they came and it was typical that he would be in the front during a firefight. That little action would later get him his captain's bars.

After a bit the patrol radioed that they had two confirmed kills and were bringing them in. All eyes were on the gate in the wire when the patrol appeared, half carrying, half dragging two body laden ponchos. The Colonel left the trench and met Lt. Stansworth just in front of my position near a little bridge over the trench where they dropped the bodies. A small crowd began to gather, mostly officers but a few enlisted as well. They were snapping pictures as Tim and I stood off to the side and eyed the lumpy ponchos.

After rolling up the bloody sleeve of the L T's jungle blouse and examining the dressing Col. Blevins asked to see the bodies.

The larger one was opened first, exposing a young Vietnamese male dressed in khaki shorts, a black long sleeve shirt, and sandals made from rubber tires. It was hard to recognize any features of the face which were now just a pair of cloudy dark eyes set in a ripped and bloody mass. It looked as if the double ought had done a thorough job clear through. From the open back of the skull there were parts of reddish grey matter spread on the poncho. Only a dark hole existed where an ear had been cleanly severed. The rest of the body was not in much better shape as evidenced by pools of half clotted blood that were starting to darken the mud around the edges of the poncho. But for the clothes, what lay there could have been the half finished job of a butcher suddenly called away from the back of his shop. Except for the occasional whirring sound of a camera advancing film it was utterly quiet as the Colonel pointed to the other smaller body and nodded for it to be exposed.

A large conical hat covered the head with the rest of the body in remarkably better shape than the first. Dressed in black silk pants and shirt and wearing the same kind of sandals, known as Ho Chi Minhs, it appeared from the large patch of blood on the shirt that this Vietnamese had been hit only in the upper torso. When the Colonel reached down and lifted the hat covering the head, a long stream of silky black hair that was caught in the chin strap cascaded down to frame the face of a lovely Viet-

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

name girl of perhaps sixteen. Her eyes were closed and except for the bloody shirt she might have been asleep. Everyone, including the Colonel, stared in open amazement. Not a camera shutter was launched nor a word said. A scene which no mere camera could capture lay before us and it was something that only we who experienced it could realize. Something that was and forever would be present to us youngsters of war standing there in shock. Always present in its absence, for it was our girlfriend, our sister or our buddy's sister, the dream girl we wanted to go home to, or the one we hoped to find when we got there. It was a piece of us that lay there dead. Without another word the Colonel quickly placed the hat back over the girl's face and left. There was no weapon found.



Those first weeks in Vietnam saw me trying to carry out the duty that had been placed before me but as far as technical radio repair was concerned there was not much that I could do. We had neither the parts nor the equipment necessary to perform such operations. If we couldn't cannibalize from radio to radio we simply shipped it up to the regiment for repair. Because of that techs like me usually ended up working down into the radio operator, or wire stringer jobs.

From sargeant down, rank was not a big deal in the com section which ran the COC bunker, the hub for all communications coming in or out of the battalion. The COC also monitored the nets of some nearby units.

The 1st, along with a few other units, was responsible for protecting the approaches to the Da Nang airstrip throughout that area immediately south of Hill 821. It was a large area that began at the east end of a valley that ran many kilometers into the countryside between lush green mountains. A pretty land dotted with rice paddies and small villages, criss-crossed by meandering streams. To stand atop one of those mountains under a sunny tropical sky and look out over that broad expanse of beauty one would think it one of the most peaceful places on earth. But from that same spot in the dead of night one would see red and yellow explosions along with the red and green tracers of small arms fire decorating the sky in many spots that had appeared so pretty and peaceful during the day. It was said that the Viet Cong owned the night. It was then that they showed just how jealous they were of their property.

All these things I was beginning to acknowledge. Things that one had to see to understand since they previously had not been fairly described by the drum beaters back in America. I was able to see that the gung ho marine and unit cohesion usually held up as an example in the states was almost non-existent there in Vietnam. Nobody was unhappy when someone's rotation date came, for to get out of there was the big prize, but the melancholy of being left behind was hard to avoid.

When I first got there I tried to get along with everybody and quickly got to know several of the young men in my section. But probably more because I had grown up that way than because of the different timelines everybody was on, I didn't get very close to many. Also, as I would later learn, getting close to someone complicated the dismissiveness necessary to keep the hurt and shame at bay when people died or the fear got too big. But just the situation we found ourselves in, fighting a war that was

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

unnecessary and much too one sided, seemed to provide enough glue to hold us together to some extent.

Since I was a quick corporal I had the privilege of sharing half a hooch, a plywood structure with a GI tin roof, with two other corporals, Amos Rooter and Charlie Roderno. Charlie had come in country only a couple of weeks after me but Rooter was already half way through his tour. The other half of the hooch was partitioned off for the two sergeants in the section, Bob Winsonsky and Alan Blume. Because of that and our shared NCO status I got to know these individuals a little better than the others of lesser rank who all shared one large hooch.

One commodity that was never in short supply unless you were in the field was beer. Every evening after chow the club would open and it was there at the crowded tables that most social activity took place over countless beers served by pretty Vietnamese girls wearing ao dais. An ao dais was a beautiful combination of a dress split up the sides worn over long silk pants. The beer was paid for with MPC or military payment currency which was as good as real money and even preferred to the national currency which was the piastre.

When it came to the military culture there were quite a few more divisions than one would find stateside. Racial divisions in the war zone were more pronounced than in America because in Vietnam everybody had a gun. Vietnam was a white man's war but the blacks, being easier to draft, got caught up in it disproportionately. Black soldiers took far more of the casualties than the whites, which along with the age old discriminatory practices of American racial prejudice caused considerable resentment and sometimes even rebellion. It was not unheard of to have actual firefights between the races although that was rare. But because in America it was usually only "the man" who had a gun and in the Nam everyone had a gun, suppression of the black race was far harder to accomplish. That led to a milieu where blacks and whites went their own ways absent the authority of the white cop with the only gun. However these segregated conditions did not exist in the bush where all were green and most interracial friendships were forged. But once back inside the wire the old standards and separations quickly reappeared, even among close friends.

Another divide could be found between those who used marijuana and those who didn't. I had of course heard of pot and while in California had even known some marines who used it. I had tried it a couple of times before I went in the marines but didn't experience any effects from it and considered it a waste of time when I could be drinking beer. Consequently I could always be found with the mostly white "juicers." At least that was the way it was before Corporal Rooter turned me on.



Rooter, one of the corporals whom I had shared a hooch with, had been transferred to the marine air wing at Chu Lai but had literally dropped in aboard a chopper for a quick visit at the 1st while on some kind of temporary duty in the Da Nang area. As luck would have it or Rooter already knew, probably the latter, there happened to be a USO show at the club that evening. Almost always these shows would consist of a bare bones plywood stage and a Korean band with at least a couple of

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

pretty girls in short skirts. They danced and sang American songs for the beer drinking, hooting jar heads gathered there. Laughter, macho jokes and too much to drink were standard fare at these events so Rooter and I quickly squeezed into the little club for some fun and beer.

After the show we returned to the hooch and were rapping about life down in Chu Lai when Rooter suddenly asked, "You want to get high?"

"What do you mean," I replied, "we just drank all that beer?"

Rooter smiled and rolled his eyes.

"Yeah, but that was beer, I got some really fine Chu Lai weed. You ever try any weed?"

"Yeah I tried it a couple of times, it doesn't do anything for me, can't see what all the hoopla is about."

Rooter eyed me skeptically.

"Yeah, where did you ever smoke any pot?"

"Back in the world, West Virginia," I said. I was about to elaborate but Rooter burst out laughing before I could go on..

"West Virginia! You mean you never smoked any Nam weed? You really are a cherry. Come on let's go outside and smoke a couple of joints. Then you can tell me it doesn't do anything for you."

"Are you crazy," I said, "you mean you're packing around marijuana?"

"Hey take it easy, you'd be surprised at the number of heads around here. It's cool. Come on new guy, I'm going to show you what's happening."

Once outside the hooch behind some refrigeration units Rooter pulled up the bloused leg of his jungle trousers and pulled a little cellophane package of pre-rolled joints out of his sock and fired one up. After inhaling deeply and holding the smoke in he passed the joint to me and exhaled.

"Take a big drag and hold it in."

I did as instructed and as I drew on the joint the pot seeds compacted in it would sometimes explode in a small shower of sparks that for a split second would light up the darkness around us. Back and forth we passed the joint until it was too short to smoke and Rooter ate it. Neither of us said anything for a while. We just sat on the ground looking at the sky.

Rooter finally asked, "Man, how you doing, good weed huh?"

"I don't feel a thing. Just a little bloated from the beer."

"You're shitting me," Rooter exclaimed as he went back into his sock, produced another joint, lit it, and passed it directly to me. I took the joint and after a long drag offered it back to Rooter.

"Hell no, not for me. I'm totally wasted," he said, "wow, man, not getting off.....you smoke that one by yourself."

"OK, but this shit don't affect me, I tell you."

We sat there for several minutes, Rooter quietly looking around at

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

the night as I puffed on the joint, holding it in and then exhaling. When I had smoked about half of it a sudden rush overtook me. Nothing like the change overtime brought on by alcohol. This was like one moment the world was one way and the next it was different in the extreme. Suddenly I felt incapacitated and no matter how hard I tried I remained that way. Time took on aspects that were foreign to me and I lost track of how long we had been there but it must have been some while for when I looked down I saw the half smoked joint dead in my hand. I looked over at Rooter who was staring at me with a big shit eating grin on his face. Reaching the joint toward him and in the most serious voice I said, "You can have this back now."

"Did you get your ass kicked, cherry," Rooter laughingly said, "still don't affect you, huh?"

I now definitely knew better than that.

"Lord have mercy, I am smashed. What the hell am I going to do. I can't hardly move."

Laughing, Rooter stood up, reached down, and grabbed me by the upper arm to help me stand.

"Come on, let's get back inside the hooch, you look like you're ready for the rack."

After Rooter got me to my rack he left, never to be seen again, just off into the night or back to Chu Lai or some other unit. He wasn't even carrying a weapon. Just that ass kicking Chu Lai weed like some vagabond who had quit the war and was now just touring the places he had been.

I laid there half on and half off the rack, almost blinded by the brightness of the overhead bare bulb. I felt as if I had been planted there and could only with time grow out of it. It still must have been early because I could hear some coming and going around me so I tried to act like I was just relaxing. It seemed so long ago that I was outside with Rooter but every indication was that it had only been a few minutes.

One thing was for sure, I was not immune to pot and for the first time in my life I was stoned. Fully dressed with not even my boots off, I was held up by the rack, and felt like I was made of stone. No longer would I consider such a feeling ridiculous. The section chief, a very tall thin black staff sergeant walked in, took one look at me peering up through the glare of the overhead light and knowingly smiled. Slowly shaking his head and wagging his pointing finger, he knew I was stoned. And I knew that he knew but not a word was said, then or afterward. The chief just quietly turned around and left. He was to rotate out soon and that was enough to keep him quite no doubt. Besides, we had known each other before he had made staff and became the section chief. Although I didn't know for sure, I figured that he had had a few puffs himself over the past year.

In the beginning I didn't smoke often but when I did I was amazed at the number of guys I knew who also smoked. The next time I decided to indulge I and Charlie Roderno, my remaining hooch mate after the transfer of Rooter, ended up in a remote ditch between the club and the wire. It was completely dark but the ditch was full of people and when the matches and Zippos were struck to keep the joints going I recognized half the

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

com section. I also found out why not many blacks came to the club. Most of them were out in the ditch doing pot instead.



I didn't do the communal pot thing much after that. Most of the time I only smoked with guys from my own section and to my knowledge, just as with beer, it never happened outside the wire. Usually I and another section member would sit out late at night, share a joint, and talk about the war and what we were going to do when we got out of it, Spending an hour just rapping and watching the pop flares shoot up into the sky and slowly drop back to earth, we felt removed for a little while.

Christmas and New Years Eve I was hidden away in the night watching the tracers fill the sky as marines all around hill 821 turned their guns to the air. Those little gigs were a slim hold on the world across the sea. It all evaporated quickly once Christmas and New Years had come and gone but when my mother sent me a small box of cheeses for the holidays that little box went a long way as it was shared a little at a time among the section. That Christmas of 1968 and many of those that followed would always be associated with that gaily packaged box of cheeses resting under a hanging M-16 rifle and a couple of Christmas cards. I took a picture of it for my personal Christmas card that I eventually gave to my step kids many years later. That was before they and their mother left me, not having been with me even a year.



There are places and times in people's lives that seem to take on a significance that one looking on might find odd. But for me, as meager and poor as it was in a war zone, that Christmas of 1968, along with the yuletide cheeses, became the last Christmas with any meaning. At that point in my tour I was still struggling to get along and remain a part of the World which I considered to be the USA. But my grip was not as tight as it had once been. Now instead of an angel atop my Xmas centerpiece there was a gun. Things had changed.

Time inside the wire was slow and that meant time to try and fill the empty feelings that nagged. But when I stepped beyond the concertina I was as full up of bone and blood as I could stand. The 1st had people a few clicks out into the bush every night on patrols and listening posts. And then there was the observation post beyond that. I had been on them all, humping the radio because the grunts had a hard time keeping anyone who could operate the radio, change batteries, and keep track of the different callsigns and frequencies. Long hours spent in the COC bunker assured that a marine from the com section was up on all that stuff.

LPs or listening posts were the worst. Three guys with rifles, grenade launcher, starlight scope, and a radio were sent a couple of hundred meters out and a little ways up hill 821. They would find a spot, settle in and try to see what was going on, reporting every hour on the situation. No digging in or any of that defensive stuff. Just quietly hunkering down and trying to freeze in place for hours on end. The joke was that you listened until you heard them coming, reported it, and hoped they passed you by without knowing it. However it rarely worked out that way. In reality a listening post was fodder, no more, no less, and if you were unlucky

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

enough to be there when Victor Charlie came you were unlikely to survive any fight from such an exposed position. But it would eliminate the element of surprise. Everybody hated listening posts and knew that it was a throwaway job with a posthumous purple heart as its only reward. Once when I thought I heard someone creeping through the bush my heart pounded so loud that I had to listen between heart beats. Peering in the direction of the sound for a couple of minutes I discovered it was just an insect moving among the weeds a few feet from my ear.

There were definitely other people out there in that darkness. Other LPs and at least one patrol. The fuzzy green mess seen through a starlight scope was almost useless at being able to define which was which. Back in the COC bunker the watch commander had a map and was supposed to keep track of everyone's position. I knew that was not really effective because I had been humping on some patrols where the sergeant in charge would tell us to just lay down and sleep. Consequently our location was not accurate..

I had almost killed some of my own men when I was on net control in the COC bunker because of that kind of bull shit. One of the LPs was reporting movement at a place where there was not supposed to be any-one. With the watch commander asleep in another section of the bunker and, not wanting to wake him, I took it upon myself to order grenades launched. Soon as I heard the explosions the screaming on the radio began.

"Stop that Goddamned shit right now!!"

Nobody was wounded but when they came in at dawn I was outside the COC bunker watching them pass. Although nothing was said, some very hard looks were exchanged. The watch commander never even knew it happened or if he did it was never mentioned. Just another example of some dumb son of a bitch dying for his country..... almost.



The 1st must have gotten some intelligence that indicated a threat to the observation post which was about 6 kilometers out. It was decided to pull an ambush on the far side of the hill that it occupied. Security platoon sent word that they needed a radio operator for the ambush but most of the lower ranks of the com section were already manning various radio posts and that left only a few NCOs and an officer. Officers, even within grunt units, never packed the radio so I, being the junior NCO, volunteered when the others firmly declined. A lieutenant that I had never seen was leading the ambush and that in itself was unusual. Plus a scout dog and handler were also going. Who was ambushing who, and why was a scout dog going on an ambush? I just chalked it up to Vietnam, the major American debacle where nothing seemed right. Altogether there were only eight of us who gathered at motor-t to board the truck that would take us out. The LT, me, and a corpsman plus five grunts, an M60 machine gunner, grenade launcher, dog handler, claymore man, and a rifleman. When we got on the truck one young black grunt was bitterly complaining, almost to the point of tears. He had only 9 days left on his tour and thought that it wasn't fair to send him out when he was so short. He got no sympathy as the others ignored him and accepted the assignment as

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

just another task to get through the best way they could. There was no joking around or any conversation as the LT rode in the cab and the rest of us rode in the back out the dirt road to the OP track. Black striped faces were serious, and except for the gear and black grease, we could have been a bunch of strangers sitting in a waiting room to see our doctor back in the world. Once we got to the little track leading up to the OP the truck dumped us and returned to base.

As the sun was setting and a tropical bluish green dusk was fast coloring our world we humped up the track to the OP and gathered around a burn barrel to receive our final briefing. Suddenly a loud metallic sound interrupted the briefing. It took but an instant for us to see the live M79 grenade bouncing on the ground by the burn barrel. We scattered in all directions. The dumb shit carrying the grenade launcher had accidentally discharged his weapon but since the round traveled less than six feet before slamming into the barrel the safety mechanism had kept it from exploding. When we realized that everyone calmed down and the LT told us what we should have already known.

“Don’t load your weapons until we leave the perimeter.”

Not even an ass chewing for stupidity took place, probably because it wouldn’t have made any difference. Plus there could be much more stuff to come very shortly. Why put down one of the few men you had to fight it with? Nam was different from the gung ho bull shit back in the states. People actually got killed ...and not always by enemy fire.

The LT made sure that my radio worked, the claymores were ready to deploy, and that there was sufficient ammunition before leading us through the wire. Once outside he told us to lock and load our weapons. The handler and his dog walked point, stringing us out a little. The LT and I were in the middle going down the rocky foot trail toward the valley floor. It was almost completely dark but the monsoon season had passed so we had the stars and a small moon to see by.

I had never been off the road in that territory and didn’t know the terrain so I just followed the LT and hoped that he had read the map correctly. On a day trip out to the OP I had seen Vietnamese carrying loads on shoulder sticks so I knew there were people around there. But now the road was long gone. We wound around and up and down small hills, putting considerable distance between ourselves and the OP. The terrain was not bad and with the extra adrenaline the pace seemed easy but visibility was not good as we passed through tropical bush with no clear vision of anything but the person ahead. It was no wonder that we saw no sign of any human presence.

The narrow path resembled some sort of game trail that meandered through the undergrowth. Only the tops of palm trees could be seen, dark shapes outlined against the night sky. Eventually we left the trail and cut across a wide grassy corridor, the first place that I could see ahead to the dog handler and the front of the patrol. The dog was obscured by the grass but in the faint light there was everyone else, strung out across the thigh high tropical meadow. Word was passed back to hold up because the dog had alerted on something. Everybody froze while the handler checked it out. I wondered what in the world could there be to check out

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

in that darkness. The dog had alerted, something was wrong. How could one know anymore than that. I was not used to the scout dogs because they usually came in and went out on helicopters--far out, all over the Nam to the grunt units who lived in the bush. We were flanked by a small bushy hill on one side and a stretch of palm trees with the same dense undergrowth that we had just come through on the other. Realizing that we were very exposed I went from being anxious to just plain scared. When I returned my attention to the point I saw the muzzle flashes and heard the AK-47 fire coming from beneath the palms to the front. Almost simultaneously another series of flashes and sound came from the same tree line nearby. I dropped to the earth as the LT screamed to return fire. Hugging the earth but still managing to get my rifle raised I emptied my magazine in the direction of the tree line as the others laid down what fire power they had. Three magazines I went through in a minute, blindly, by rote, not thinking or wishing for anything but to please not die. I lived only within the all encompassing sound of the fire. Desperately trying to get more ammo from the bandoliers tangled around my chest, I began to discriminate the sounds of grenades from the launcher as they hit along the tree line. I thanked God for that dumb son of a bitch that almost blew us all up back at the burn barrel. Not to mention the M60 machine gunner I could hear firing furiously.

I couldn't really see what was going on because I was so scared that I couldn't raise my head out of the grass far enough to see much of anything. It must have been a full two minutes of withering fire before I heard the LT yelling to hold the fire. Still glued to the earth when the LT appeared beside me and told me to contact the battalion or the OP, I reluctantly sat part way up and flicked up the tape antenna on my radio. The LT ran off toward the point. I tried to make contact but got nothing, not even the sound of a squelch. I checked the antenna connection but that did no good either. That left only the battery so I rolled over and shrugged off the radio with the bandoliers of ammunition tangled around it. Always I went out with a new battery and logged in but this one must have been bad so I started un-taping the spare I always carried at the bottom of the pack. That's when I felt it, a neat round hole in one side of the radio and a large jagged exit hole out the other side. The thing was useless, leaving us with no communications. The LT returned and said that the handler had been hit bad and wanted to know if I could get a med-evac. All I could do was show the bullet holes in the useless radio and mutter a few words. I was so scared and ashamed that I could hardly talk.

Amazingly there were only two wounded, probably because the attack had been a classic hit and run. The machine gunner had been hit in the lower left arm, a clean flesh wound with minimal damage. A field dressing would temporarily take care of it but the handler had a sucking chest wound and was barely conscious. The corpsman worked on him for what seemed like a long time, almost losing him a couple of times, trying to get him stabilized enough for carrying. He gave long odds on his survival if he wasn't lifted out but the best that we could do was carry him back to the OP and call for a dust off there.

Nobody, including the LT, wanted to reconnoiter the tree line. If there were any VC bodies there they could stay there. Besides there were most likely booby traps as well. Somehow we had walked right into the am-

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

bush either by making too much noise in our approach or someone on the inside had passed the word about the operation. I wandered about all the drunk marines and pretty girls at the club but what the hell did I know, I just wanted to get the hell out of there. It took the rest of the night but we tied some ponchos together and took turns carrying the handler as his confused German Shepherd remained with whoever walked point. During my turn to help with the carry I listened to the awful wheezing and moans as the handler tried to breathe. Many times we had to stop and let the corpsman work on him. I was glad to get away from that wheezing sound when I was relieved but the next time it was my turn I heard nothing. Knowing that the handler must be dead, I quietly cried and cursed God.

Near the OP we popped a red smoke grenade in the misty dawn light and yelled out who we were. Once inside, I called in a med-evac with the OP radio.

As the chopper touched down another corpsman quickly jumped out and examined the handler lying there on the bloody ponchos. White that showed through his half closed eyes and lips that looked like they had been painted blue on his pale young face formed the vision that would always represent that mission for me. The exposed chest was still and covered with a mixture of dried mucus and blood. What had once been alive and loved by someone was now surely long gone.

Out in the valley, on a patchwork of different shades of green, the sun was starting to reflect from the numerous paddies and except for the noise and dust from the chopper it was so maddeningly serene that I wanted to scream.

Quickly and with the detachment of repetition the corpsman looked up at the LT and shook his head. The corpsman and a couple of grunts lifted the handler into a large dark plastic bag laid out on a stretcher and zipped it up. Now handling only cargo, the corpsman and crew chief raised the stretcher, shoved it through the open door of the chopper, and hopped aboard as it lifted off. The whole dust off had taken less than three minutes and I figured that was how long it took to get out of the war that way. So fast that I didn't even know the handler's name.



Part Two — After the Ambush

After the failed ambush I began to slide even more, smoking more pot, drinking more, and giving less of a damn about fighting the communist. What the hell was I doing there anyway. I had known from the beginning that it was messed up but I had thought that if I applied myself I could stomach it and move on. I watched the higher ups for a clue as to what this war was really about. It took very little time for me to become convinced that they had no idea either...other than to advance their own careers. From this conviction I developed a hatred of authority and class that would plague me from then on. Those in authority would throw my life away to gain an advantage in their quest for a bigger, better, and richer American dream. I may have come from poor stock and little family but Vietnam was showing me that there were some things that I could not stomach. Unforgivable things. That kind of unholy sacrifice for gain, dressed in the garments of patriotism, be it personal or national, was one of them.

I was not alone in those views. All through the war zone similar attitudes were developing. However I continued to follow orders whereas some others often refused and ended up in the brig. Many times for murder.

In a neighboring unit one staff NCO was so hated by his men that they faked an enemy attack then cut him down with a machine gun as he ran out his door to hide in a nearby bunker. Many of the murders, called "fragings," after the fragmentation grenade, were done with hand grenades thrown on or under sleeping victims. Or simply by shooting them during a firefight or enemy attack. It was a terrible thing to do but it all started with the lies and the draft, then developed into a festering boil that eventually, in some cases, could not be contained. The majority of those murders were never prosecuted. And that along with a similar rebellion in the US helped end America's involvement in Vietnam. But for the young people caught up in it at the time the damage was done. I was one of them. Despite my own feelings about the war, I had tried to comply with the bull shit. Now I only wanted out and away from those who willingly participated in it, lived by it. If I couldn't get away physically I would do so mentally just as I had done with mind travel in boot camp on Parris Island. But the war was much bigger than boot camp and I found it impossible to get away. Even with the use of drugs and alcohol there was always the next time. The next useless bull shit to put up with, the next wasting of a human being. No longer did I care about who won the so-called fight for freedom. We were all losers as far as I was concerned. The young people like me had a favorite phrase among ourselves that grew out of that desperate loss.

"Fuck it, it don't mean nothing."

There was no event or disappointment, including death, that could not be somewhat assuaged with the utterance of that phrase.



An order came down to the 1st to send a com marine of lower rank TAD or temporary assigned duty to Yokosuka, Japan for seven days. I got

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

the nod and was told to report to the marine barracks at the big naval base and attend a class on some antiquated piece of communications gear. It was just another ridiculous quota that had to be filled. Since I was becoming the old man in grade as a corporal, the new section chief, a Filipino who had made the marines his career, decided I should go. Perhaps also figuring in the mix was that I, despite my attitude, was known to have a bit of intelligence. That would make me a good stand in for the 1st when it came to the technical stuff. As far as I was concerned I couldn't believe my luck. I welcomed the chance to get out of Vietnam for a week.



I arrived at the little operations center at the air strip and presented my orders. After waiting a while, I was told to grab my gear and board a jeep just out the door. I rode out onto the tarmac to an area where a big Air Force cargo jet was being loaded with aluminum crates.. Hopping out of the jeep, I went to the little side door under the wing and offered my orders to an Air Force Tech Sergeant standing by the pull down steps. The Sgt. glanced down at the orders and looked up at me.

"You going to Japan?"

"I guess I am," I replied.

Having already turned his mind to something else, like what kind of chow he would get for lunch, the Sgt. simply jerked his thumb up and said, "Get aboard."

Inside the hold of the huge plane there were large wheeled metal slabs mounted on tracks that ran along the deck from the front to the back. They were used to slide the cargo on and off. A couple of small fold down benches made out of nylon straps and aluminum tubing were hung on each side of the bare bulkheads for any passengers and that was it. No windows, only the back doors and ramp large enough to drive armor or semi trucks on.

As another young marine showed up for the flight the load masters continued to shove stacks of aluminum crates aboard until we were full up with cargo. The doors closed and we took off.

The hold was dimly lit by a couple of small red bulkhead lights and it was quite cold. After coming out of the tropics and flying for about an hour, I felt like I was freezing my ass off. The crew remained forward in the sectioned off nose of the plane while the other marine and I rolled down our sleeves, propped our feet on the cargo and hugged ourselves to stay warm. We hoped that the flight would be quick. It was not. The other marine got up and started walking back and forth in the space between the cargo and the bulkhead, trying to stay warm. He eventually paused beside a tall stack of the aluminum crates and began fooling with one of the attached tags. He stood there for a long while and I wondered what could be so interesting about a cargo tag. Finally, returning to the strap bench with a look of astonishment on his face, he said, "Man, you know what all this cargo is?"

I shivered a little, "What?"

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

“Man, these are bodies, KIAs, we’re on a morgue shipment of American dead from graves registration.”

Suddenly we both knew why it was so cold. I slowly removed my boots from the body in front of me and wondered if it was the dog handler I had helped carry out of the bush.

The constant whine of the jet engines filled the air as I studied the deck. Without looking up I said, “Fuck it, it don’t mean nothing.” The other marine just nodded and studied the deck as well. The two of us never spoke again until we parted upon landing at Yokota Air Force Base in Japan.

In my bush fatigues and floppy hat, wearing once black boots that were scuffed tan from use and not really giving a shit, I was put through a rigorous customs search. The young Air Force guard went through every single item that I carried and then searched my person as well before allowing me to move on. I received many a second look from the spit and polished military personnel coming and going at the busy air base but not one person messed with me. I did not bother to salute nor speak. Simply presenting my orders and silently going where directed I almost dared anyone to get in my space. Straight from the cargo of the dead, I didn’t care what anyone thought. What the hell could they do to me anyway, send me to Vietnam?



It was late at night as I rode a military bus for about two hours through one continuous stream of multicolored neon lights with Japanese writing in characters that were completely foreign to me. As the only passenger on the bus I passed through the outskirts of what I figured to be Tokyo. I followed the coastal congestion through Yokohama and further south to the big naval base at Yokosuka and its Marine Barracks. When I reported, the duty marine showed me to an isolated and unused part of the barracks where I unrolled a mattress, made a rack, locked my gear in a locker, and slept.

The next day, wearing the same attire and with the same attitude, I was sure that this strict marine unit would reprimand me. Marine Barracks, throughout the Corps, was known for its spit and polish, but the reprimand never happened. Sometimes I would be asked who I was. I would simply say that I was TAD from Vietnam. That was the end of it no matter where I went on the base. Not one person accosted me, though I looked like military rabble.

I found my class when it started and went to it when I was supposed to, sometimes falling asleep. But even that was ignored because, just as I had expected, it was a typical bull shit quota class on some old piece of gear that was no longer used. The lifer who had ordered it was so out of it he didn’t know that and anybody who did was not senior enough to tell him.

Everything I did, I did alone. I knew no one and wanted it to stay that way. Occasionally, at the almost vacant NCO club, some sailor would initiate a conversation from the next bar stool just long enough to find out where I was from. Having found out, they would silently smile for a mo-

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

ment and politely excuse themselves. There was no problem with that, in fact I welcomed it, for deep down I knew it didn't mean nothing anyway.

Passing through the week of class and learning nothing was a skate since the classes didn't last a full day. I had time to visit the Great Buddha down in Kyoto and take a train ride to Tokyo. Once I had a steam bath and massage followed by a visit to a little bar in downtown Yokosuka. The owner, a beautiful madam, tried to saddle me with a young beginning prostitute. After drinking a lot and buying the young girl drinks which I knew were only tea I went to a hotel by myself. Prostitutes were no use to me and never had been. Not because I was otherwise adequately serviced, but because they just didn't do anything for me.

Those things I did in a couple of days. Mostly I just wandered around, whether on base or off, watching the people and always figuring that they had no idea of the things that existed beyond their bubbles of concern. To them it didn't mean nothing either. Why should it mean anything to me? But always in my mind I knew that I didn't have long to sit on the fringe of real life and speculate as I watched it come and go. For the poor white trash of Appalachia it would be back to the Nam where such stuff was ridiculous and never rested well on the conscience to begin with.

The week in Japan went by so quickly that later it became like a dream that couldn't be remembered two minutes after waking.

After reversing my mode of travel used to get there, minus the crated war dead, I found myself back in Vietnam not sure that I had ever been gone. Nothing had changed. Only it was hotter and drier as the summer approached.

During this time when forced into competition with other marines for advancement I always did well by just simply regurgitating the material that had been fed to me. My attitude never changed but when the facts of the data were posted I found myself at the top of the list, an irony lost neither on myself nor the lifers. The CO of the 1st must have thought that it was a big deal though for it wasn't long until I was given a plaque proclaiming me to be the marine of the month. Somewhat amused with all the hoopla and the trinkets being passed around, I wondered why this corporal with so much time in grade was getting all this candy. Had they forgotten that I had been turned down for Sergeant once already because I wouldn't lie and say that I intended to make a career of the crotch. In fact I had been so emphatic in my rejection of that idea that the much surprised lifer on the board who asked the question had to ask it again. When I answered with the same emphatic, "No!", the lifer, with an angry look on his face, told me that I could go.

I was probably the senior corporal in the whole company but after the marine of the month thing it wasn't long until I was informed that I made sergeant and would receive my warrant at a company ceremony the following day.

The next morning the com section LT, an ex-school teacher from Boston, formed us up and made sure I was presentable. The company commander, an older grey haired captain who was a mustang, which is an officer that has risen through the lower ranks, came out of the company

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

hooch, said a few words and then asked me to step forward. The old captain walked up close and squarely faced me.

“Corporal Hayes, you have earned this promotion and I am pleased to give it to you. I know that you will not stay in the Marine Corps but I hope that you will use this promotion to inspire you in your civilian life to achieve success wherever you can. Congratulations.”

I replied, “Thank you, sir,” as I accepted the warrant, shook hands and saluted.

Looking a little tired and somewhat sad the captain then told the company 1st Sergeant to dismiss us and went back into the hooch. It was done. While I treated the whole thing respectfully, I knew that the only reason that I had gotten promoted was because it would have been an embarrassment for me to remain a corporal. The old captain was not, nor had he ever been, part of my problem. Because he was old and near the bottom of the back side he could be trusted to not try and gung ho his way to greater things at another’s expense. Just like me, he was simply trying to get through Vietnam and back to the world. I saw it written on his face and heard it in his words and for that I am thankful. Other than that the whole thing meant nothing nor, more importantly, did it change anything.

I moved my gear into the best part of the hooch with Winsonsky. He was the only other buck sergeant in the section. Sergeant Blume, after shipping over for Staff Sergeant and ten thousand bucks, had rotated back to the states so I took his empty rack underneath Wins.

Wins was the wire chief. He taught me how to string wire and use a set of gaffs to get up the poles. I was stringing and troubleshooting com wire in addition to filling in the operator slots. The wire jobs took me out in order to keep the landline communications to other units in the valley working. It was work that was done only during the day and it was almost always uneventful.

Wins came from Idaho and, like me, was from the poorer class. We got along good. We wanted the hell out of the Corps and Nam and that shared passion was enough to make it easy to share the same half hooch. Roderno was now alone in the corporal’s quarters in the other half of the hooch so most of the time we just left the adjoining door open and shared the whole hooch.

Corporal Charlie Roderno had come to the 1st a little later than me. He was a tech also but, like everybody else, cross trained in all the com section responsibilities. Younger and shorter than me and a bit on the heavy side, he pulled his weight just as well as the next guy. For someone so young in a combat zone Charlie had a calm demeanor and was slow to anger, a fact that would sometimes make him the butt of cruel jokes that ass hole marines liked to play. That and the fact that he had a wife and baby made Charlie seem a little different than the ordinary jarhead. Recently he had gone on emergency leave to attend his father’s funeral. His father had died suddenly, yet through all that grief and responsibility Charlie had remained solid and kept an even keel. Or, perhaps because of those things, he saw a bigger picture than most and it steadied him.

With my aloofness, I matched well with Charlie and his steady tem-

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

perament. Maybe that was why we tended to pull together. Whatever the reason, Charlie was the closest friend that I had. We often got high together as we let the crotch and the war go by, talking about other things like philosophy and why we thought things were the way they were. Rarely would we resort to the "it don't mean nothin" equation. Mostly because Charlie wouldn't allow it. He would challenge me on it in a way that left me vulnerable and made me look at myself. Because of this tendency to try to get to the root of things Charlie was not the average marine's favorite kind of guy. In a different vein, his analytical interests put him almost as aloof as me. In a marine combat unit such qualities can be very hard to come by and to have one, let alone two complementing individuals of such nature was rare. For me, in a land of worthless endeavor and sham, along with a multitude of other undesirable qualities, my relationship with Charlie had value. And that made it important where no real importance seemed possible. As a result of that it turned out that even I grew a chink in my armor.



When the war was not heating up around Quang Nam Province life in the 1st got so boring that almost any excitement was welcome. It was also a good time to get downtown Da Nang to the giant military PX and buy some hard liquor. Charlie and I hitched a convoy into the crowded city. We got off just on the far side of the local shanty town next to the PX and cut across the squalor of the makeshift village.

Betel nut chewing women, stirring a pot of who knows what, squatted in front of their shacks constructed of junked military material. The pungent smell of nuoc mam or fish sauce was so thick that it would turn your stomach if you weren't used to it. Peasants, chased from their homes in the countryside, mostly by the US military, saw us with our M-16s coming. With betel nut blackened teeth, they smiled up as we walked by. After we passed they frowned at each other and spit long streams of black juice into the dust beside their fires. There were no men but there were plenty of kids, not even waist high, that crowded around us, begging and trying to reach into our pockets on one side while just as many tried to tug our watches off on the other side. Some of them reached up little packets of 10 marijuana joints for sale, \$1.00 mpc. Other kids, in broken English, would hawk their sisters who were waiting among the shanties, hoping that their little pimps would bring some money home for rice. Most were starving. Once healthy people who had proudly owned and farmed their own land were relegated to lives of abject poverty, their land now part of an American free fire zone.

Charlie and I hurriedly got through this shameful result of the war and past the guarded gate into the PX. We bought a fifth of Jack Daniels and a couple of cartons of cigarettes. After looking around at all the cheap electronics and jewelry we made our way back out to the street and caught another convoy going back south. As we passed the road to the 1st and hill 821, we jumped off and caught a six by or large troop truck that took us back to the unit. We did pretty good, in and out and still had time for evening chow, which we skipped, knowing that the COC bunker would have plenty of night rations later if we got hungry. Instead we secluded

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

ourselves in the hooch, cracked the Jack Daniels, and proceeded to get wasted, eventually crashing late in the evening.



In the morning I continued to sleep through the explosions and shaking hooch, Tim rushed in and roughly shook me awake.

“Hurry up and get your radio and flak jacket on, the ammo dump is going up.”

As the hooch continued to shake from the explosions I hurriedly got geared up while the prior night's Jack Daniels caused its own kinds of explosions in my head. So far the fire and explosions had not engulfed the 2000 pound bomb bunkers and the 1st was just trying to stand by and hope that it could be contained. I and Charlie, who was no doubt also hung over, were sent to the area closest to the ammo dump to secure the generator and make sure it kept working. We just sheltered against the sand bagged diesel machine, smoked a cigarette, shot the shit, and listened to its chugging while explosions rocked us. Hungover and just another day in Vietnam, neither of us were very concerned because we knew that there were worse things. After about an hour of increasingly heavy explosions we received word that the 2000 pounders were about to go up. We should get the hell out of there.

Loaded with all that we could carry, the whole 1st battalion swept through the wire into no man's land under a blazing sun. Moving as quickly as possible with small breaks for logistics and communications, we swept west through the bush until we were about a click or one kilometer out. We started digging and looking for any kind of shelter that we could find. Recognizing the radio from its antenna, some officer stomped up and told me to get a dust off for one of the scout dogs that was dying from heat exhaustion. A dog was considered more valuable than a man but even so, after I told the chopper the coordinates and which direction to come from, he radioed back that they would not come into the area--it was too hot. So what could I do--fuck it, it don't mean nothing, man nor beast--I rogered the chopper and informed the waiting officer who cursed and stomped away.

By the time I had found a crater to take refuge in the explosions had grown huge, bigger than anything I had ever seen. Every now and then I would stick my head up to observe the spectacular effect, a huge flash of orange filling half the sky and pushing pulsating waves of oxygen as the concussion and matter expanded outward. Dropping back down into the crater, I plugged my ears, opened my mouth to equalize the pressure, and waited for the blast of the concussion to pass. In the relative quiet that immediately followed I heard little noises, almost like rain drops, hitting the top of my helmet and along the shoulders of my flak jacket. I looked to my shoulders and saw hundreds of tiny pieces of warm grey black shrapnel falling. It was actually raining shrapnel.

Eventually we had to quit that location too and evacuate to another marine unit further away. The explosions continued for two more days and could be seen and heard from all over that part of South Vietnam.

Once or twice I had stood and listened to distant B-52 strikes and felt

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

the ground tremble. Now I had a very small taste of what it was like underneath those falling bombs.



We got back to the 1st battalion area and there was not a thing left standing except the face of the career advisor's hooch where one went to ship over. That was the place where many lifers got their beginning. I was not superstitious but it seemed like a bad omen because everything else was completely flattened. Pieces of shrapnel, both large and small, lay everywhere. So it was back to the hot and dusty tents with everything in short supply..... until the Seabees arrived to rebuild the base.

The Seabees came, and along with them better supply. We of the com section bartered old radios for some things and stole other things. One night I was caught coming out of a mess refrigeration unit with a big stick of bologna stuffed in my trousers. The mess private who caught me just took it and told me not to come back. That's the way it was. If you wanted something you either stole it or traded for it. The Navy Seabees had everything and the marines had nothing.

Trading and stealing from the Seabees, I, Wins, Charlie, and a new corporal just in country managed to get together enough construction material to rebuild our NCO hooch because the higher ups had decided not to have it rebuilt. Many lifers felt that the com section was too elitist and needed to be brought down a notch so the Seabees only built one large hooch. Everyone lower than a staff sergeant was supposed to stay there. But the four of us, as was often the case in the Nam, ignored the policy and re-built our own hooch anyway. It was a nice place decorated by blow torch seared plywood walls. A nicer hooch than some of the higher ups had because we did it ourselves, including procuring the material. No doubt that was the reason that after about two weeks I and the other three were ordered out and into the crowded big hooch while a couple of lifer Ssgts. who weren't even from the section moved in. I had been on the edge for a long time about my commitment to the war and the corps. That pushed me over the line and a hatred grew inside as I and the others pulled the combat duties that the lifers avoided. They would set inside their confiscated hooch, misfire their weapons, and almost shoot their toes off. I knew that the green machine had lost me no matter what bonus was offered. When they asked me to ship over I would tell them to stick it up their ass.

Not long after we were kicked out of our hooch I had a chance to do just that. I became short enough for the pitch. The career advisor called me into his office to lay the bait and contracts out which were the standard \$10,000 and promotion to Ssgt. plus choice of my next duty station. What a lie I thought. I would get the money and the rocker stripe but the next duty station would only last long enough for a transfer back to the Nam to take place. I felt so good about being short enough to receive such enticement that I didn't even tell the lying bastard to shove it. I just simply laughed in his face and told him there was no way in hell that I would ship over. The guy obviously heard that a lot because he seemed to expect it and let me go quickly.

Another way I exhibited my attitude was by refusing to wear my ser-

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

geant chevrons. Several times I was ordered to wear my rank but I simply said that I would, then ignored it. After a while they just stopped trying to get me to do it.



It was July 1969 and I had been in WESTPAC or western pacific for 10 months of my 13 month tour. My attitude had deteriorated significantly over time. I was on the edge a lot, getting into fights with other marines, many times over nothing. Maybe it was time to use my R&R or rest and relaxation. I had a choice of Hong Kong, Thailand, Taiwan, Australia, or Hawaii. Only the married people who wanted to see their wives went all the way to Hawaii and most of the other places didn't speak English so I chose Sidney, Australia.

For six days I left the war in Vietnam and took in the different life in Sydney. The feeling my absence from the Nam and the Marine Corps brought about was overwhelming. I passed TVs parked on the streets of Sydney so pedestrians could watch the first man on the moon one July afternoon of 1969. I only glanced at it for a moment and had a few words with a spectator before moving on. It meant nothing to me and only brought about an angry feeling. Big deal, I thought, but it won't save one dumb son of a bitch in Vietnam from the bullet that's got his name on it.

At first I mostly just wandered around luxuriating in the clean clothes and the reduced stress. At an event that was somehow partly sponsored by the American government, I met a girl. There wasn't an abundance of them but I had gone with the attitude that I was going to come away with a girl. My own efforts had not gone well and this event was specifically for Australian girls that wanted to meet American servicemen. Lucky for me there wasn't an abundance of GIs either because sitting right behind me at the introduction, waiting for me to turn around, was young Alicia Mays. She was a pretty redhead with nice legs, short hair and a touch of freckles under deep blue eyes. About the same age as me, she had a modest demeanor and moved with a quiet confidence on a trim fit frame of average height.

Alicia lived with her parents in a suburb of Sydney called King's Cross. It was a working class neighborhood not unlike the same in most American cities. The one time I went there to meet her parents I was treated nicely. They asked me to join them for afternoon tea and I was a little surprised when I was served a fried egg and toast with my cup of tea. I did not realize that afternoon tea included a snack as well. They talked some about America but the subject of Vietnam was avoided. I liked her parents and could see that those good people were simple working folks who did not warmonger like many of the Americans. Also it seemed that in Australia there was less class difference and consequently a stronger social bond among its citizens.

Alicia showed me many of the sights of Sydney but, unlike the temporary girlfriends of many servicemen on R&R, she did not stay at my hotel. However we spent much time there making out and having room service bring drinks and ice plus whatever we wanted to eat. Sometimes we would use the dining room but most times we were out and about or in the hotel room that had a nice balcony with a view of the city and harbor.

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

Despite a couple of romances of prior years I was still rather sexually inexperienced. Alicia seemed not to mind, only checking my clumsy moves of seduction. We usually met at the hotel lounge in the afternoon and spent the rest of the day and evening together. Always late in the evening Alicia would take a taxi home.

The few days of R&R with Alicia flew by and when it came time for me to return to Vietnam it was one of the hardest things that I had ever had to do.

Before I left I gave her a pearl necklace that the shopkeeper who sold it said would really stun her. The guy had said that it was the type of gift an Australian would give to his fiancé. With lots of money left over and nowhere to spend it, I was glad that I could buy it because Alicia had in no way tried to use me. Truly she was interested in me for what I was. She had always been nice to me as well, sharing her city, and keeping me company during my brief period of freedom, even taking me to her home and parents which was unheard of for Nam soldiers on R&R. When I gave her the necklace the last time I saw her she was stunned. A beautiful string of cultured pearls, they misted her eyes as she accepted them and whispered a thank you. I kissed her goodbye, told her I would be back, and, with a heart as heavy as I could ever remember, left to catch the shuttle to the airport.

After refueling in Darwin and noticing Australians quite different from the ones I had seen in Sydney, I looked down at the Great Barrier Reef as we flew over. I wished to God that I did not have to cross that ocean back to Vietnam. Being in a very nice situation for those few days and feeling life once again was a joy beyond words. Returning to the non-life of the Vietnam war was a huge downer and, consequently, my emotional strength was at a low ebb.



Back in the Nam I isolated myself and became more depressed but I still wrote a letter almost every day to Alicia telling her that I would return to Australia. Finally I got a letter back that was nice and thanked me for my mail but not much else. Not long after that I got another letter from her that thanked me for the time I spent with her and let me know that she valued it. But she said that she would not wait for me because she was sure that I would find lots of girls when I returned to the United States. She wished me luck and hoped that I would not let that make me sad. It didn't make me sad. I even started to come up from my depression but I never forgot her, always remembering and appreciating her as one of the most important girls I had ever known.



Part Three – Charlie’s Weed

Things at the 1st had not changed much during my brief absence except Charlie had managed to get some good weed which he shared with me when it came time to burn the toilet drum.

In the Nam, while on base, instead of digging a hole underneath the wooden cut out toilet seat, the severed bottom portion of an empty 55 gallon oil drum was placed instead. When it got full someone had to drag it out, pour kerosene in it and burn it, frequently stirring the burning waste in order to ensure that it all burned.

The section chief told me to see that the shiter was burned. He passed on his responsibility and avoided being the one to give the order, leaving me holding the bag. Word spread fast in the com section when it was time to burn the shiter and not an idle soul would be found....always. I could have ordered any of them to do it anyway but I hated authority. So just going through the motions to see if maybe a miracle would occur and someone would be available I made a quick check through the section anyway. I found everybody extremely busy as expected. Tasks that had sat idle for months were now under urgent repair by young men who were unable to meet my eyes as they stated the super importance of their work. No doubt, I figured, it was as good a day to get stoned as any. I took the good pot Charlie had given me, drug the shit drum out myself, got it burning nicely and, while the vile odorous black smoke enveloped me, fired up the joint and stirred away. No one came near enough to know what I was smoking, that’s for sure. Tens of gallons of burning human waste, sending out a plume of heavy dark smoke ripe with the smell of human excrement mixed in urine, took care of that. Excellent weed it was too. So fantastic that when the job was done I was feeling quite hungry and proceeded directly to the mess hooch for chow. I didn’t even have to stand in line for when I got within ten feet of anyone they howled their displeasure at the smell and immediately vacated the area. With a whole large picnic table in my own vacant private section of the large mess hooch I thoroughly enjoyed my chow. Then I went back to the com area, stripped my clothes, which I would later give to one of the mamasans or Vietnamese laundry women to launder, and took a shower. To hell with the lifers, I burned shit and enjoyed it more than anything they could come up with. One day I would get through this soup sandwich and rejoin the world free of those who shoot their toes off while playing with their guns like a bunch of kids. I thought back to the ship over interview I had recently attended and laughed so hard that Charlie heard me and yelled over, “Pretty good weed, huh?”



The war started to heat up after the 1st went up with the ammo dump. Even over by Marble Mountain it was hot as I stood and watched the F-4 phantom jets working out. They took turns diving in and releasing their loads of napalm. Tumbling in their wake and hitting the ground, the canisters erupted in fiery red and yellow explosions as the jellied mass of burning chemical was spread over the area. It stuck to everything it touched. There were villagers all through that area and I wondered if they had been moved into the city to form another slum or had they just been told to

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

leave. If they had simply been told to leave that meant that beneath those jets were a bunch of black charcoal mounds of flesh to be added to the daily body count of enemy dead. Some marines called them crispy critters. Fuck it, it didn't mean nothing I decided and went on about my business which by then was just trying to make it to my rotation date less than a 100 days away.

At night the sounds of the Vietnamese 155 battery next door and the big marine 175 howitzer on the next hill across the valley became more frequent. It became harder to get any real sleep. When the 175 went off the ground would tremble slightly and the sound wave would jar the hooch with a bang. Throwing rounds deep into the countryside helping some poor son-of-bitch try to avoid dying for his country, the big guns many times got the range wrong or the radio operator or some other screw up plotted wrong and only expedited the poor son of a bitch's passing.

I could easily tell the different guns from the sound of their discharges so one night when a couple of big explosions at the 155 battery sounded different I got up, went outside, and looked over at the ARVN compound. It was not easy to see past all the gear and bunkers scattered about but there were a couple of fires burning and except for the light from the fires, it was completely dark. The siren blasted which told me that something was definitely going on as I ran back inside the hooch, donned my gear and grabbed the PRC-25 radio always stationed at the end of my rack. Since I was assigned to the battalion commander I only needed to muster outside the COC bunker and wait for the colonel as most everyone else was running for the perimeter. The colonel appeared and learned that the ARVNs had been hit by sampers using satchel charges. ARVNs were very lax about security and this time it had cost them. A couple of Viet Cong had slipped into the battery and tossed a couple of satchels loaded with explosives into the hooches of sleeping soldiers, killing some and wounding many.

Over a land line the ARVNs got permission to bring their wounded over to the 1st for treatment and minutes later stretchers of wounded soldiers began to appear around the battalion sick bay which was located only a few feet from the COC bunker. No way they could get all the wounded in the little sick bay so there were stretchers of wounded scattered all over the ground outside. Every now and then the colonel would appear at my side to see if any word had been passed over the radio. But mostly he remained in the sickbay hooch as I waited outside among the wounded. The 1st had only one Doctor and a couple of corpsmen so the casualties didn't move very fast. In fact I couldn't see how they were moving at all. In the beginning the doctor had managed to get a couple into the hooch and since then he had disappeared while the others quietly waited. That was the thing that struck me. How quiet their wounded were. Americans would have been raising hell. They couldn't all be unconscious, there were too many. If they were unconscious there were going to be plenty of dead before the night was over.

A couple of feet away was one wounded soldier lying on his side, still on the stretcher. The back of his white t-shirt was dark with blood. I studied him for movement of any kind and found none. Probably dead I figured.

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

How many ever made it to the doctor, I did not learn. The colonel saw that the medical people were doing all they could and that he was probably just getting in the way so he and I headed out to the perimeter. We stood by for several hours, occasionally sending or receiving reports. The VC had gotten away and were probably back in the village.

Eventually the alert was called off and on the way back inside I noticed that all the wounded were gone. Wondering how many had died and how many had been able to just walk away after the alert had been called off, I kicked a canteen cup that somebody had dropped and muttered, "Fuck it, it don't mean nothing."



The ARVNs wanted to survive no less than the Americans in that God damned part of Indo-China and they didn't get a pass out after a year. It was their home for as long as it lasted and they took every opportunity to better their odds. Most of them had no more choice about being in uniform than I did. Sometimes I would stare into their eyes as I passed them on the road. There was so much hatred there that I stopped looking after a while. Their looks told me that it was my fault that they were either about to die or lose an arm or a leg. Their officers tended to be suck ups to the higher ups in the American force and thought nothing of sacrificing their men in order to shamelessly gain some shiny trinket. It was a similarity among those of all nations that mongered for war. A similarity that became recognized by the kid from the Appalachian hardwood forest as more of a threat to peace than any communist domino.

Not long after the 155 battery got hit the security platoon patrol returned with a couple of ARVNs they had stumbled on and killed. What the ARVNs were doing unarmed in a free fire zone no one knew nor cared it seemed. Their bodies were brought all the way to the H&S company hooch and dumped in the dirt outside the hooch door for display. As the lifers gathered around and tried to decide what label to attach to them I noticed that these dead still had all their ears. Since they weren't American it was soon decided that how they were labeled didn't really matter so their deaths by friendly fire were quickly forgotten--just more unknown meat that needed to be removed from the hot sun.

Two nights later the 1st got theirs' when we were hit by mortars. I had just been reassigned to a bunker line radio and luckily got through the incoming fire and to my assigned bunker. I checked in without a scratch and monitored the net as other posts checked in. I heard a new voice operating as the Six and knew something was wrong because Charlie was assigned to the colonel. What the hell was going on? Maybe Charlie had switched with someone for some reason. Being directly connected to the battalion CO had its benefits as far as safety was concerned but some didn't like the extra scrutiny from that high up. Maybe Charlie had switched because of that.

We took 86 rounds of 82mm mortars that night and many wounded, mostly from the administration section which had taken a couple of hits right next to their hooch. Two people were killed in action. One was a captain who had only been in country two weeks. He was standing up outside his hooch and giving directions when a big hunk of shrapnel took out

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

a large chunk of his neck, killing him instantly. The other one which I refused to believe at first was Charlie Roderno. Charlie and the Colonel had been running for the perimeter, coming in late as usual. An 82 took them both down. One of the colonel's legs had been badly messed up but Charlie, who had been between the blast and the colonel, never had a chance. He had been riddled from head to toe. When they removed his radio, along with the worthless flak jacket, one of Charlie's arms almost came off. They had almost made it to the bunker line when they were hit. One of the black grunts jumped out of the trench and drug the colonel in and then went back and got Charlie. He later told me that Charlie never knew what hit him. A couple of weeks after that the grunt received the bronze star with combat V for valor. I heard that the colonel, whose war was now over, received a purple heart and the same medal as the grunt who had saved his ass. Charlie got an aluminum box. His war was over too.

The marines of com. section didn't take it lightly. Maybe with time we would be able to proclaim that it didn't mean nothin' but right then it hurt. I was convinced that Charlie's life was wasted by a country and it's people that were nothing but a bunch of lifers in civilian clothes. People that could not see more value in a human life than the value that was placed in the huge industrial markets and their power hungry military customers. People like Charlie literally fell through the cracks in such a system. Those warmongers with pockets full of war booty knew very well about the people like Charlie, myself, and others. To assuage their guilt they fabricated those bright shining lies about heroism and honor and even created equally false and shiny trinkets to support those lies. I was fit to be tied with my anger and the belief that me and all the people like Charlie were only a bunch of dumb son-of-a-bitches stumbling through a bloody mess so some lifer, military or civilian, could enrich themselves and later use those riches to hold themselves a class above the ones who stupidly did their bidding. With Charlie's death an attitude hardened that had been a long time coming. Consequently, along with the anger and disillusionment that were my steady companions, I no longer felt that I was just as decent as the next person. Even worse, I didn't care.

With time, dope, and alcohol most of the com section slowly got back to a semi-even if somewhat shaky keel but I was not so lucky. I was more anxious about many things, particularly my rotation date and being able to make it back to the world. All pretense of discipline slipped out of me. Seldom was I included in the command loop anymore because in the Nam one thing that soldiers developed quickly was the ability to know when someone has had enough. So it was with me as I sank deeper into a kind of agitated depression that led to nights I could not sleep at all. When I could sleep I would be jerked awake by nightmares about murder and revenge. Those nightmares troubled me deeply, not because murder was wrong, but because I didn't want to be held up from rotation on a legal hold. Knowing that I was unraveling I desperately wanted out of there before the worst could happen. On top of that, I got sick with what I thought was malaria. Fever and chills with diarrhea so bad that I didn't even bother to dress. I just went naked to cool off and clean up under the water hose. Gulping water that came out of my ass almost as fast as I swallowed it, followed by chills seconds later, I wrapped up in poncho liners while lying and shaking on my rack. The corpsman said that I only had dysen-

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

tery and gave me some little white pills which were of no help. I wouldn't even have bothered with the corpsman except the chaplain found me squatting under the water hose and ordered me to go. After a few days it passed and, feeling a lot weaker, I returned to my normal pissed off self along with the depression which had for a while taken a back seat to my physical ills.

I drank even more with hangovers becoming my normal state but I was no weird agent. Throughout the Nam that had become a way of life for many who fought the war. I had only progressed to the point where it was easily recognized and therefore most others left me alone to do what I saw fit. Short fuses like the one I had developed were easily seen and wisely avoided. However no one ever had to take an assignment because of my situation. I was still the senior person of the lower ranks and the others in the section were under me. Just as I had done with the burning of the shitter, I avoided participating in any kind of command structure and either did it himself or deemed it foolish bullshit and eliminated it entirely by simply ignoring the order. Perhaps because even the lifers could see that what was happening to them was really doing no one any good, they left me alone. The LT stayed completely out of the way and his com chief avoided all but the most basic interaction with me. When armed people have had enough of the bullshit in a losing war, survival is all that is really important and anything beyond that is unwise to push.



The days were winding down for me with a couple of weeks left until my rotation date so I was surprised when I suddenly received orders to rotate back to the States. Hallelujah my time had come ...just in time. It took a couple of days to check out of the battalion and return my weapon and other gear. During that time I was able to have conversations with some of my men on a level a little different than the usual. There was a sadness in our exchanges, sadness that they were being left behind, that we couldn't all go. But we had been living the life of survival long enough to appreciate that right then, at least, one of us was going to make it out. However none of that sadness would overcome the relief I felt when, with my orders in hand, I jumped into the jeep and was driven away to stage for the freedom bird back to the world.

Much like it had been in Okinawa where I had staged to come in country, I waited for two days at staging to learn when I could fly out. My time finally came but I was told that something was wrong with my orders. They said that I would have to return to my unit and get it straightened out.

Livid with anger and almost as plagued by fear, I hitchhiked back to the 1st with a worthless set of orders in hand. To me it was another example of why lifers remained in the military. The simplest task they could screw up so bad that no one in civilian life would tolerate them.

There I was, back at the 1st, belonging to nobody, with no weapon, and no idea of how long I would be there or what was wrong with my orders. Matters were made worse by the fact that my replacement, a sergeant from Quang Tri, was already there and I didn't like him. To me he acted like everything was normal and that he was just going to shape up the

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

guys in the com section concerning their job performance. He acted like a lifer and I could tell that when it came his time to ship over he would do it. The same guys I refused to give orders to, this newcomer wannabe lifer was going to "shape up." I felt a deep resentment for having to watch the change plus I was stuck in a limbo combat zone and so nervous about getting killed in a place where I wasn't even supposed to be.

A couple of days later, as I was returning from another night of drinking, I came across the new sergeant in the shop hooch and told him just what I thought about him coming in there and changing things so he could get on in his career. Drunk and again unable to control my temper, an argument developed. I took a swing at him that missed. My swing was countered by a quick hook that caught me squarely on the jaw. However it had little effect as I smothered any further punches when I closed in and grabbed the guy. We began careening around the shop, knocking over equipment and breaking things until a couple of others, along with the com chief, came in and broke it up. The chief demanded to know what had happened. The new guy told the truth by saying that I had come in raising hell and took a swing at him but I claimed that the other sergeant threw the first punch. Nothing got accomplished that night about who was at fault but the next day the LT, having received a report of the incident, called both me and my replacement in and asked what had happened. Again the same stories were repeated but from our demeanor and the way things had been going it was fairly obvious that I was lying. That's when the LT told us that if we didn't come clean he was going to have a court martial to squeeze out the truth. I just angrily glared at the floor for several moments until the LT dismissed us.

The next day, sure that I was going to be put on a legal hold and about as depressed as I had ever been, I was lying on my old rack, staring at the tin roof. Tim came in carrying the new set of orders, just cut from administration. He had just happened to be in the COC when they arrived and immediately grabbed them, saying that he would deliver them.

Tim and I had known each other a long time since we both had come to the 1st not far apart. That meant that Tim would be the next one in the com section to rotate. Classified in a lower MOS than me, Tim had never been able to get the rank that more desirable specialties attained but he had humped when he had to and skated when he could just as well as anybody. He and I had always understood each other and got along. Looking up at Tim standing there with a smile on his face and the orders in his hands I flashed on the day I had burned the shiter. I recalled that it was Tim who had played it up most about being involved in urgent work. Both of us had known that it was simply a ruse to avoid the shit detail but I had accepted it and moved on to do it myself. Tim looked steadily at me, handed me my orders and said, "This is payback shithead, hurry up and get your gear, I've already checked out a jeep from Motor-T."

I had never unpacked so I grabbed my sea bag and we quietly went through the back of the company area, found the jeep and birded out of there. God bless Tim and all the other lowly ranks just like him.



Back at staging again and expecting to be called back at any time it

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

didn't take me long to get the travel section of my orders this time. After one more sleepless night I had them and clearly saw what had been going on with the mix ups. Now I was going back to the world on a troop ship as part of a marine regimental troop withdrawal. It was part of Nixon's political stunt, pretending a troop withdrawal when in fact all the marines on the float were being replaced and rotated anyway. At least I was going to get out of there, regardless of the means, and that was what I held on to. I and 1800 other marines were crammed aboard the USS Thayer and another 200 were put on our flag ship, the USS Tripoli. It was a flat top helicopter carrier. When we pushed off from Deep Water Pier in the Da Nang Harbor I felt a little like I was born again.

That first night at sea under a moonlit sky, as we sailed past the same mountains that I had flown over on my way in, was far different from the nights in country. In country there were skies that sometimes had rockets overhead riding a red flame to the tune of a high pitched whine. If you heard them you wondered who got it. If you didn't you got it. Now at sea the night was quiet, cool and smelled of salt with a peacefulness that came from the knowledge that it was over. That was until a couple of hours later when I saw the same mountains again pass above the port side, which meant we were traveling in circles. What the hell was going on? Why couldn't they, for once, do something in the way it was supposed to be done? With the dawn came the news that we had to return to the harbor to net load more marines from an amphibious launch. By the time all the screw-ups got straightened out and the marines were loaded we had been at sea two days and hadn't gone anywhere. Maybe we weren't really leaving but being relocated somewhere else along the coast. Finally during the second night the coast line passed from sight as we really set sail.

With a two day layover in Okinawa to take on water and food, yet not allowed to leave the ship, it took 22 days to reach the California coast line. That was going all out most of the time except when we skirted a typhoon and pitched up and down and around so bad that it was very easy to lose somebody and not even know it. Lifers completely disappeared during that action.



The two ships drifted into their piers and tied up. I had no idea where we were but it was almost November and the weather was sunny and warm so we must be somewhere in Southern California. Coming across the Pacific we had gone from hot to cold and now back to warm. We were a salty looking bunch for the small marine band and the few USO girls on the pier with lemonade and donuts. Who those refreshments were for was a puzzle to me because I knew that I sure as hell wouldn't be allowed to join them. So I yelled down and had the girls throw some of the donuts up which I and the others along the railing wolfed down. The little band puffed and beat out a couple of marches in their ragged red uniforms, looking like castoffs specifically picked to welcome a bunch of castoffs.

The whole thing seemed to me like a Norman Rockwell poster with characters that had somehow come to life and gathered on the pier for a photo shoot. What could any of them possibly know about the place the people aboard this big boat were coming from? Had they an inkling of that truth they surely would not have been there dressed in their Baby

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

Janes and floral dresses, serving lemonade and donuts. To me it was just another surreal example of Americana that had never made it inside the loop of what really was.

When we disembarked all the lifers that had stayed hidden away at sea reappeared and started giving orders to marines who visibly didn't give a damn. I had lost my hat and my blonde hair had started to come over my ears. The colonel who was trying to get us lined up told me to put my cover on. I told him that I didn't have one, expressing it in such a way that indicated if the colonel wanted me to have a hat he would have to give up his own. Certainly not pleased but shut down, the colonel quickly ended the lifer lessons as we were herded aboard buses and taken to Camp Pendleton where we had come from a little over a year and a different lifetime ago. Long haired and bare headed, standing in my first formation at Pendleton, I heard them announce that anyone with less than 6 months remaining on their active duty time would be discharged as soon as the paperwork could be done. With less than 5 months of active duty left, I figured it was the sweetest sounding thing I had heard since it all had begun more than 2 years and 7 months ago. For the next nine days I wandered around in an almost dream like state.

I was placed in a group just like himself, ones that were already gone but still physically there as far as the Marine Corps was concerned. Except for my boots and the color of my shirt and pants I might have been a civilian laborer working on base for the day. Never wearing a hat because no one ever gave me one and never getting a haircut despite frequent threats to hold me back if I didn't, I loafed around knowing by then that they were not going to saddle themselves with the likes of myself any longer than they had to. When I was out alone roaming the base on foot an occasional shocked lifer would jump in my space and demand to know what outfit I was from so they could fry my ass. Squarely facing them with a blank look I would tell them that I was from RELAD which was short for released from active duty. The way they almost swallowed their tongues and turned red, sometimes even stomping their feet like a small child was just too sweet.

Finally all in one day I processed through hours of paperwork dressed in my winter green uniform and signed the DD-214 that honorably released me from active duty in the United States Marine Corps. With a silent thank you to Tim and hope that he was close behind mixed with the intense sorrow that Charlie didn't make it, I squeezed into a limousine full of other discharged marines. We exited Camp Pendleton for the last time. Just to make sure that it was real, I took a look back and watched the gate grow smaller.

Having plenty of war booty in the form of a fat wallet I rode up to LAX and bought a first class ticket to D.C. to visit my mother. She had left West Virginia while I was away and was now teaching high school in a Maryland suburb of DC. After showing her that I was still alive, with little fanfare, I returned to the airport and caught the next hop to the Appalachians of West Virginia. During the hour long flight I gazed down at the rolling landscape of the hardwood forested mountains. For some reason they always seemed to make me sad with their isolated demeanor, sometimes half hidden in wispy fog. This time was no different, only more so. Those

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

age old hills were impervious to the goings on from outside and had not a hint of the momentous events that crisscrossed the globe and what I had been through the past year. Yet that is where it all began for me. Being alive was all I could bring back to their intractable presence. Amidst such loss and guilt that just didn't seem fair.

