

A Soldiers Story

Chapter 1

It was February 2, 1968, when I exited the plane. The heat of the South East Asia night was like a furnace. I was barely eighteen, with no idea of what awaited me in this strange and faraway land. A sergeant was shouting at us to hurry off the plane. We were the new troops and we had landed right in the middle of what was called the Tet offense. Flares lit up the night sky, while helicopters overhead fired mini guns. Waves of tracers filled the air, glowing red like fire. Off in the distance, mortar rounds were exploding and the burst of machine gun fire shattered the night's silence. We all ran toward a quiescent hut, my head lowered and my heart filled with anxious thoughts of home. As we entered the building, other young men were being hurried out to the plane. I knew that these were men that had done their tour of duty, and they had survived. Some you could tell were seasoned warriors by their hardened faces. As they were leaving, one of these seasoned soldiers looked me square in the eyes and said, "If you want to stay alive, forget everything you ever learned." Those departing words pierced my heart like an arrow; they were to stay with me throughout the war.

That night we were loaded on buses and taken from Bien Hoa airport to Long Bien Base Camp. We had to travel with the lights off and stay low to the floor, as we were told the enemy was infiltrating all areas. We arrived at Long Bien late in the evening. Each man grabbed his duffel bag and we were rushed into the barracks. The camp commander told us there was a blackout – no lights were allowed to be turned on, not even flash lights. Each of us had to find a bunk in the dark barracks. I located a top bunk, with no idea who the soldier below me was. An officer came in and warned us that if rockets and mortars were fired into our compound, we were to grab our mattress, hit the floor, and cover up with the mattress. I had no time to think about all that was happening. It all come about so fast, my mind whirled in a daze. I tried to relax, but the tension and fear were overwhelming. When my eyes finally started to close and sleep began to set in, an explosion suddenly awakened me.

The sky again was lit up with flares; gunfire was all around us. Within seconds there was another explosion, this one was in our compound. I jumped off my cot to the floor, and reached up for the mattress, but it had already been taken. I lay on the floor with no covering, no shelter. There was no room under the bunk beds, for others like myself had crawled to any space they could to find shelter.

Mortars and rockets continued to detonate within the compound. The sky lit up with a flash as each round hit. I thought my heart was going to burst; never had I known such fear as this. I thought if there was a hell, this was

it. None of us had rifles, and some of us yelled out for them. However, soldiers outside rebuked us and told us to stay low and not to leave the barracks. I had visions of some enemy running through the door shooting us all as we hid without any weapons to defend ourselves. The explosions never ceased that night, as the fighting raged around us. Not far from our barracks there was an ammo dump, a place where weapons and ammo were stored. A Vietcong sapper infiltrated our camp and set off an explosive charge that killed him and destroyed the ammo dump. Throughout the night and the next day the ammo exploded. This was my first twenty-four hours in Vietnam.

The next morning they still kept us within the barracks. I wrote a letter; I penned the fear that was in my heart onto paper: "There is no way that I can survive one year of this hell on earth. I will never be going home." It was as though I were writing my own eulogy. I never sent the letter; I was searching for answers while trying to piece together the puzzle my life had become. I started to think of my past: "Maybe this is recompense for all of the wrongs that I have committed, maybe this is my just reward..."

Chapter 2

My past life was one of heartaches and bitter changes...