

# Rite of Passage

a short story by Tony Peluso, author of *Waggoners Gap* and *Archangel of Sedona*

2230 Hours

November 20, 1968

Hooch Four, Enlisted Barracks

Headquarters, Headquarters Company

Support Battalion, 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate)

Camp Radcliff, An Khe, Republic of Vietnam

Steve Brunetti began his monologue for Eddie and me, while finding his balance on the lawn chair. Leaning back, he wedged it against the beam supporting our roof. A natural comedian, Steve claimed the title of unit smart-ass.

Earlier, the First Sergeant had pinned the black, three-striped sergeant's insignia to our collars. None of us had 20 months on active-duty. Eddie Jones was 22 years old. Steve and I were 21. Jones was a tough black kid, who'd played lineman in junior college. Brunetti, a gymnast, often punctuated his gags with a back flip. I served as middleman in our band of musketeers.

No rite of passage went without its initiation. After the promotion, we bought beers for the senior sergeants. Later, we continued drinking in our hooch.

Brunetti was telling jokes, when Staff Sergeant Delgado stepped into the cubicle that we'd created with empty ammo crates.

Delgado was as big as Jones. He'd served 18 years, but hadn't risen above staff sergeant. At the promotion party, he'd commented that elevating cherry jumpers to buck sergeant was a travesty. Brunetti responded, "Sarge, cream rises to the top and a turd will always sink to the bottom of the bowl." The other sergeants laughed. Delgado turned an evil shade of red and stormed out.

When an intoxicated Delgado appeared in our hooch, I knew there'd be trouble. Size aside, I bet on Brunetti. I looked over at Jones and winked. When I looked back, Delgado had drawn a Model 1911, Colt .45 semi-automatic. He pointed the pistol at Brunetti, who was cantilevered in the lawn chair.

“OK, asshole!” Delgado shouted. “I’m gonna ventilate that smart-ass, Dago face of yours, you cherry punk!”

Delgado stood six feet to my left. I could feel my heart beat in my temple. I looked to my right. The outside wall blocked any movement. Instinctively, I moved fast to the left, focusing like a laser on the pistol in the right hand of the homicidal staff sergeant.

I got my hands on the gun an instant after Delgado fired. Steve swiveled the chair enough that the bullet missed him, passed through the screen, some wooden slats, and lodged into the sandbags beyond. My hands in a death grip around his, I pushed the pistol upward, as Delgado fired into the roof.

Throughout the brawl, Delgado swung at my head with his left hand. I struck Delgado twice in the face with my left elbow. He buckled.

Delgado ended up on his back with his right arm extended. I twisted his wrist and put my left foot on his chest. I stomped Delgado in the ribs, while I pulled hard on his right arm. I could feel his arm dislocating. I pried the .45 from his hand, breaking his index finger. I dropped the pistol and kicked it away.

Eddie and Steve joined me in subduing Delgado. When we finished, he lay unconscious in a bloody heap.

We carried SSG Delgado to the orderly room and dropped him. I pounded on the door, until an irritated top sergeant emerged in his skivvies.

“What the fuck is this, Giordano?” Top demanded.

“Didn’t you hear the shooting, Top?” I said, panting from the adrenalin.

“No! Been listening to Brazil ’66 with the headphones. What shooting?”

“Delgado tried to kill Brunetti!” I responded.

“He did what?”

“Top, that fucker tried to shoot Steve,” Eddie offered. “Tony stopped him.”

The first sergeant stood up, surveyed us, and directed me to report. I did.

“Mother fuck!” Top Barnes responded to my report. “I’ll get the medics. You three vigilantes wait here. Understand?”

“Yes, Top,” we uttered in unison.

Twenty minutes later, medics picked Delgado up in an Army ambulance.

We all thought that Delgado would go to Long Binh Jail. After a month, we concluded that Delgado must have died in the hospital, since we’d heard nothing and no MPs ever showed up to question us. Top never asked for a statement.

Over the next few months, other soldiers praised me. I never admitted that before I jumped Delgado, I looked to the right. I had no choice. I knew Delgado would have shot Eddie and me, when he finished with Steve. I’d acted out of self-preservation, not gallantry. Selfishly, I did nothing to discourage the compliments.

By March 15th, I had 20 days left. Eddie had gone back to the world. I recall the afternoon that Brunetti ran into the hooch, out of breath.

“Tony,” Steve began. “Guess who’s back?”

“Who?”

“Buck Sergeant Delgado.”

“Damn! He’s back and still an NCO?”

“Yeah, I saw him,” Steve revealed. “Spoke to him too.”

“No shit?”

“Yeah, the colonel took his rocker with a field-grade Article 15 for drunk and disorderly. Delgado claims amnesia. We fucked him up. You broke three of his ribs and fractured his jaw. Gave him a concussion.”

“Didn’t Top tell the officers what happened?” I asked.

“Tony, you know these older guys. They stick together.”

“You talked to Delgado?”

“Yeah, he’s faking the memory thing. The guy’s a psychopath.”

From that moment, Steve and I carried concealed side arms. We didn’t trust the unit to protect us. Steve and I slept in shifts, one of us always on guard.

Three days before I left Vietnam, the MPs arrested Delgado. He’d left camp at night to go down to An Khe Village and screw one of the whores. Colonel Angel administered another non-judicial punishment. This time he busted Delgado to Private (E-1) and sent him to correctional custody.

The hypocrisy of a one-grade bust for attempted homicide, versus a five-grade demotion to E-1 for sneaking off the base camp, did not escape me. My tour in Vietnam and the Delgado incident, took me from boy to man. I learned that self-reliance is the key. If we’d waited for someone in authority to act, Eddie, Steve, and I would be names on a wall in Washington, D.C.