

Not in Kansas

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

After leaving Fort Lewis in the winter of 1968, I spent twenty-four hours on a Flying Tiger Airlines charter soaring westward across the Pacific. With stops in Hawaii, Wake Island, and Clark Air Force Base near Manila, 299 of my comrades and I finally reached Cam Rahn Bay on the east coast of the Vietnam. After a brief ride to the replacement depot, we processed through personnel. We learned that, due to the high casualty rate in the Tet Offensive, the Army had temporarily suspended assignments to the 101st Airborne. Instead, the paratroopers among us would serve in the infamous 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate).

Four months earlier near the village of Dak To in the Central Highlands, the Herd—as the Brigade was known—fought an epic battle on Hill 875 against heavily entrenched North Vietnamese regulars. Though the 2nd and 4th Battalions had won the savage fight, we knew that they had suffered hundreds of casualties. All of us understood the reality of this assignment. General Westmoreland used the Herd as his fire brigade, sending the Brigade's four infantry battalions to the hottest spots and most difficult missions in II Corps. Karma!

The next day, 39 of my airborne buddies and I flew in an USAF C-123 to Camp Radcliff near An Khe Village, the site of one of the worst defeats in the French debacle in Indo-China. After dismounting the aircraft, we marched up a steep hill to the ridgeline overlooking the airfield.

Not 30 minutes later—and in broad daylight—the North Vietnamese unleashed a 122 mm rocket attack on the airfield. Our C-123 was refueling when the attack began.

One of the rockets exploded close enough to the huge, rubber aviation fuel bladder that it exploded in an immense ball of flame. The fire spread to the C-123. We watched helplessly from one-half mile away as the aircraft burned to the ground.

The destruction of the aircraft seemed ominous and prophetic. Though we knew better, it was as if the enemy had destroyed our way home. We were in the shit. We weren't in Kansas anymore.