

Twenty-first Birthday Surprise

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

The aging process has always reminded me of an oncoming freight train. You can stand on the right-of-way near the rails; gaze out to the horizon toward the distant sound, and for the longest time the train seems remote and distant. If you turn away and then look back, it's on you in an instant. If you're too near the tracks, you get run over. C'est la vie!

Life is full of milestones: first day in school, learning to read, puberty, a first kiss, obtaining a driver's license, meeting that special love, finally getting laid, a graduation, marriage, birth of your first child (though not necessarily in that order). Some milestones are more exciting than others. I recently achieved one of the more mundane, and it caused me to recall a profound benchmark in my life—my twenty-first birthday.

Growing up in Arizona in the 50s and 60s was a blessing. Phoenix was much smaller, less cosmopolitan, more provincial, but just as hot in the summer as it is today. I graduated from a Jesuit prep school in the mid-sixties and went off to Arizona State University in Tempe. Like all of my peers, the official state drinking age of 21—mandated by draconian statutes passed by a puritanical legislature—inhibited my social life at college. Driven by a misplaced sense of duty, the ASU administration enforced these laws with unflagging dedication.

Drug use was not as prevalent as it would become later in the decade, and all collegiate parties and events included prodigious alcohol consumption. Although we could attend private parties and drink, bars were off limits to any male under 21. The sexist bastards who operated these state-licensed dens of iniquity made an exception for

females, especially if they were attractive and possessed a certain moral flexibility. The sexual revolution was on the horizon.

Competition for the available females in this environment forced my peers and I to be imaginative. The most common product of this late adolescent creativity proved to be the counterfeit driver's license. Using these fake credentials allowed us entry into the fabled inter sanctums of the Sand Bar, Elbow Room, Library, and a dozen other college joints in Tempe, where the objects of our ardor migrated in voracious packs to stalk older guys.

More young men carried Hawaiian driver's licenses in Tempe, Arizona in 1967 than in the entire city of Hilo on the big island. Estimating the resident population of Hawaii in the sixties, every male between the ages of 21 to 23 would have had to leave the lush Polynesian life-style in Hawaii for the harsh, dry desert clime of the Valley of the Sun.

Armed with a phony Hawaiian license, I spent two years at ASU studying Sociology, a discipline that I detested. I was a bright student and did very well the first year, but failed to show up for my finals in my third semester—having been lured to Denver near exam time by my equally unmotivated girlfriend.

When I say unmotivated, I refer only to academics, since she had decided to be Avant-garde in the looming sexual revolution. As a lover, Donna was truly inspired. When she gave me the choice to either return to Tempe and sit for my exams in Sociology, Russian, Algebra II, and Air Force ROTC, or to shack up with a beautiful, nubile, and willing lover, I showed all of the judgment one would expect of a nineteen-year-old.

My propinquity and the resulting semester grade of 0.00 eviscerated my 3.5 GPA. It sealed my fate with the local draft board. While ASU felt vindicated with placing me on academic probation, the draft board took a more menacing approach.

The Maricopa County draft board was hard pressed to meet its pro rata share of the 20,000 young men that the United States drafted each month in 1967, and was thus inflexible. Dedicated public servants, they approached their obligation to send boys off to war with a religious devotion. Unmoved by my pleas for mercy or reconsideration, the board cancelled my student deferment, reclassified me as 1-A, and made me take a physical—which I passed with flying colors.

The board did allow me to finish the spring semester, but warned that I'd be drafted in the summer of 1967. I thought a lot about my predicament that spring. I wanted more control over my life.

When the semester ended, I'd done well enough to get off academic probation, but I was through with Sociology. I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life, but I was sure that social sciences would not play a role.

I craved an adventure. I made a life decision. I wanted a benchmark experience. On my twentieth birthday, I celebrated wildly. As a last act of defiance, I gave my super-effective Hawaiian license to a younger fraternity brother who looked a little like me, but without the large nose that I'd inherited from my mother's side.

I enlisted in the Army and asked to go to Officer's Candidate School, Flight School or Airborne (Jump) School. I qualified for both OCS and the Warrant Officer pilot training program, but class dates were left pending in the turbulent, uncertain future.

The Army did send me to basic training in Texas, Advanced Infantry training in Louisiana and Jump School at Fort Benning in Columbus, Georgia.

I was a good soldier. By the time I finished Jump School, I was a private first class, a respectable rank for a cherry jumper with less than six months in the Army. Cherries are paratroopers who are qualified to wear the basic wings, but who have not made more than the five jumps at Benning. Marines call their cherries "five jump chumps." In the Airborne, it's far better to be a cherry than a leg, but—like virginity—you want to lose your cherry as soon as possible. The only way to do so is to make that sixth jump.

I received orders for Vietnam with an assignment to the 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate). My orders allowed for a short leave en route to deployment through Fort Lewis and McChord Air Force Base in Washington State. I planned to spend most of my leave with Donna. After all of the training, I'd hoped for moral and *other* support from my lover. Sadly, during our first meeting in months, I learned that my absence did not make her heart grow fonder.

On the last occasion that I ever saw her, Donna explained that my voluntary absence from her life had been a bitter disappointment that she tried to forget in the arms of a draft-dodging war protestor from a rival fraternity at ASU. I was surprised that I was not hurt. I actually felt liberated. I cut my leave short and moved up my plans to report for shipment to Vietnam.

In this way, I found myself at McChord on the first day of the Tet Offensive of 1968. Televisions were not as ubiquitous as they are today. I did see glimpses of the troubling news on the black-and-white sets in the day room of the replacement depot. I

tried to get a sense of the threat, as I passed in and out on make-work details designed to keep young soldiers, like me, from thinking too much about what lay ahead. A few days later, 249 other soldiers and I boarded a Flying Tiger Charter. Twenty-four hours after that, after stops in Hawaii, Wake Island, and Clark Air Force Base (near Manila), we arrived at Cam Rahn Bay, in the Republic of Viet Nam.

Thirty-six hours later, I manifested on a C-123 cargo plane with 39 other cherry jumpers, and we flew to Camp Radcliff, which was a large base camp near the village of An Khe in the Central Highlands of RVN. Though the Army saw fit to designate the place as a camp, no one ever called it that. We simply referred to it as: An Khe.

After the start of the Tet Offensive, I had serious concerns about my assignment. Throughout my training, the 173d Airborne—known affectionately to its alumni as the *Herd*—had the reputation of being a tough, elite unit that took a lot of casualties. Unlike most Army scuttlebutt, this bit of information proved to be all too true.

In November 1967, while I was still in AIT at Fort Polk, the Second and Fourth Battalions of the Herd had fought a monumental and bloody battle for Hill 875 near a Special Forces Camp at Dak To. While there is no doubt that the Second and Fourth Bats prevailed in that deadly engagement, they paid a very high price. Hundreds of paratroopers died and nearly 1,000 were wounded.

During the in-processing into the Herd, I received an assignment to the Fourth Battalion, 503d Infantry. The Fourth traced its lineage to the original Army Airborne battalion, the 1/501st. Hence, it adopted the original motto and war cry: *Geronimo!* I was to become a Geronimo.

While ominous, the assignment proved to be fortuitous. The battles of Dak To and Tet had occurred very close together. Despite its weakened personnel state after Dak To, the Fourth Battalion acquitted itself gallantly in the first week of Tet.

Mustering its available manpower in its infantry companies to come to the aid of a surrounded artillery battery near the American air base outside Tuy Hoa, the 4/503d soundly defeated the North Vietnamese regulars who had threatened to overrun the artillerymen. I was still in the Brigade's jungle school at An Khe when the Fourth went on the attack.

We heard that the combat at Tuy Hoa was so intense that the battalion commander ordered—and personally led—a bayonet charge to break the NVA siege. Geronimo! Welcome to Vietnam.

After the effects of the Battle of Dak To and the first week of Tet, Brigadier General Allen directed the whole battalion to re-equip, re-organize, and train the cherry jumper replacements at sites around the Air Force base near Tuy Hoa. By the time I signed into my company, the battalion had changed its focus from offensive operations to defense and training.

Ten weeks later, two other soldiers from the 4/503d and I received an order to leave Tuy Hoa and report to Chief Warrant Officer Bell at the Personnel Office at Brigade Headquarters in An Khe. In the two-and-a-half months that I'd been in country, my unit had spent almost the entire time in the field practicing sweeps, searches, and interdictions in an environment in which a real enemy lurked menacingly and struck viciously. It was dirty, difficult, and dangerous work, though it was mostly tedium, punctuated by brief periods of terror.

There were no showers, toilets, or mess facilities. We hadn't had a hot meal since Cam Ranh Bay. We had to deal with booby traps, mortar and rocket attacks, harassing fire—which we mistakenly labeled as sniper fire—suicidal sappers, and the threat of ambush.

Jim Baird, Jerry Grover, and I viewed the summons to headquarters as a temporary respite. A trip to An Khe promised the possibility of a hot shower, a cold beer, a dry bed, and a cooked meal—Paradise to an 11B1P (infantry enlisted, light weapons, airborne). Our brothers-in-arms did not even try to mask their envy.

Looking back on our meeting with Mr. Bell, the experience seemed surrealistic. We met with him in that portion of the base camp at An Khe that the Brigade had taken over to house its administrative support troops. These buildings were sandwiched between the airstrip and the site of the largest Post-Exchange I ever saw in Vietnam. Support Battalion labored in the shadow of Hong Kong Mountain, a large hill, towering several hundred feet above the camp. It dominated the whole perimeter. The Viet Cong often infiltrated the lower slopes of Hong Kong Mountain to snipe and lob mortar rounds at our rear echelon.

For some reason Mr. Bell met us outside the Personnel Office. We sat on a crude, wooden bench under a shriveled tree, uncomfortably close to an outdoor site designed to provide the support troops with a sanitary place to urinate, known as a “piss tube.”

Compared to conditions back in the unit, our venue was delightful. We had come directly from the chopper pad to the office, as directed. We hoped to resolve whatever chicken shit issue the personnel weenies had conjured up, so we could get some chow and maybe a shower, before someone thought to send us back to Tuy Hoa.

Mr. Bell had other ideas. When he strode out of the building, we could see that he wore the multi-colored bar of a Chief Warrant Officer-3. He had master blaster wings and a combat infantry badge. Obviously, he'd gone to work in personnel after a stint in the infantry.

In the Army Airborne of that era, Mr. Bell's experience was not unique. Jumping was dangerous and voluntary. Young men who had the brains, skill, temperament, and good judgment to become technicians and clerks most often were too smart to go Airborne. Since everyone in the 82d Airborne Division, the 101st Airborne Division, the 173d Airborne Brigade and a dozen smaller airborne commands had to be qualified paratroopers, the Army took airborne infantrymen and made them into whatever else it needed—training them through what it jocularly called “OJT,” for ‘on the job training.’

While Baird, Grover, and I sat outside looking like three stupid cherries, Mr. Bell introduced himself. “Gentlemen, I’m Ed Bell. I’m the Chief Warrant for Personnel. I have some very good news for you. Are you boys ready for some good news?” he asked.

We just nodded our heads and Grover spoke for all of us. “Yes, sir.”

CWO3 Bell was an African-American officer, who—I later learned—grew up in the Watts section of Los Angeles. He was in his late 30s, stood 5’8” and weighed about 140 pounds. He was small, but looked very scrappy. He wore the arrowhead patch and airborne tab of the Special Forces on his right sleeve. He'd either been a Green Beret or had served with them in combat. We gave him our full attention.

“Apparently, you boys want to be officers, right,” he began. “I’ve reviewed your personnel jackets. Each of you has scored high on your Army GT exam. Private Giordano, you scored within three points of the max, didn’t you?”

“Yes, sir,” I responded.

“Yes, you did, boy. Baird and Grover, you did well too. So you shouldn’t be too surprised that the Army’s going to send you to the schools that you requested.”

“No shit, Chief?” Baird asked in total surprise.

“I would never shit a fellow paratrooper, son, even if he is a fucking cherry,” Mr. Bell returned in a mildly menacing tone, designed to communicate that Baird hadn’t yet earned the right to call him Chief. “Let’s see,” Bell continued. “Giordano, you’ve been accepted to Infantry Officer Candidate School at Benning, Artillery OCS at Sill and Warrant Officer Flight School at Fort Wolters, in Texas. Baird, you can go to Armor OCS in Fort Knox. Grover, you can go to WOFS at Fort Wolters.”

“Holy shit, sir! When do we leave?” Grover asked, as excited as I’d ever seen him, including the times we’d been shot at.

“Well, not so fast, boys,” Mr. Bell said. “You’ll have to finish your tours with the Brigade first. But since you’re all Regular Army, we’ll set up class dates for you at these schools when you DEROS from here and return to the world.”

“Fuck!” Baird said simply, but he spoke for me as well.

“Geronimo!” Grover added bitterly.

“Gentlemen, these appointments are also contingent on whether you’re still physically qualified to perform the duties of a commissioned officer or warrant officer pilot, when you finish your tours,” Mr. Bell added.

“Sir, does that mean that at the end of our tour, we can’t be badly wounded, maimed, or dead? If we don’t get hurt, we can go to OCS or WOFS?”

“Giordano, you’re as bright as the test results suggest,” Bell responded, tongue in cheek. “Look, men, you all signed up for the Airborne. You’re very smart. You all knew what it would mean, right?” Mr. Bell asked rhetorically. “But don’t despair. Colonel Angel, the Support Battalion Commander, wants some young cherries to OJT into vacancies that we have in the battalion.”

I have always considered these words to usher in one of the most important moments in my life. It took me less than one nanosecond to grasp their import. Bell had just implied that we could get a reprieve.

In April of 1968, I did not yet have a good grasp on the American public sentiment toward the war in Vietnam. My parents were neutral or mildly anti-war. No one who wrote to me discussed the growing protests. In the 173d Airborne, American papers and magazines were non-existent or months old, tattered, and dog-eared. The Stars and Stripes and the Armed Forces Radio did not report the growing opposition to the war.

So the decision that I made in the next nanosecond had nothing to do with some high principle or philosophy. In the preceding months, I had come to realize how likely I was to become a casualty. While I hadn’t seen much combat, I’d seen enough of Vietnam to know that my chances of getting wounded were high.

I had read Ross Carter’s *Devils in Baggy Pants* about his experiences as a paratrooper with the 82d Airborne in World War Two. I tried to follow his example and not worry about what might happen to me, concentrating on what I would do to Charlie or Nathaniel Victor when we crossed paths. I believed then and I believe today that I was a competent soldier. I’m pretty certain that the officers, NCOs, and peers in my unit thought so too. Geronimo.

I tried to analyze the cause and effect of my predicament. Would my decision to embark on a week's worth of sexual experimentation in Denver, which caused me to neglect my exams, which resulted in a low GPA, which tempted the draft board to reclassify me and move me toward military service, actually result in my untimely death? Though young and immature, I was smart enough to know that every act had consequences—intended and unintended.

An actual connection with getting laid in Denver and getting killed or wounded by the NVA seemed absurd. But it was a possibility, if not a probability.

If the logic of cause and effect had merit, what could be the meaning of this potential reprieve? Life at An Khe was not without its dangers, but the chances of survival were astronomically better than with the 4/503d. So within one second of hearing Mr. Bell impliedly ask for volunteers in Support Battalion, I knew he had me.

If that was all that had happened, my mental state would have been less guilt ridden. I was just a PFC. I would go where the Army wanted me. What choice would I have? My decision was not even a second old and I caught myself rehearsing my excuses for leaving the line unit. I'm not sure why, but I knew I would need them.

Instead, Jimmy Baird had to ask CWO3 Bell a question. His question has haunted me my entire life.

“Mr. Bell, what about our buddies in Fourth Battalion?” Jimmy asked.

“What about them, Private Baird?”

“Well, sir, I'm not sure I fell good about leaving them, for a safe job in the rear.”

Baird, you are a son-of-a-bitch, I thought to myself. Fuck!

“That’s very commendable Baird. I understand how you feel. Do you want some time to think it over? If you don’t want to volunteer, we’ll get you some chow and send you back to Tuy Hoa on the next chopper.”

“Yes, sir. I’d like a little time. How much can I have?”

While you’re at it, why don’t you ask if you can blow him, you bastard? I thought bitterly, fully understanding that Baird—not I—had the moral high ground here.

“Well, Baird, there’s no real hurry, but there is a war on. Go on down to what passes for a mess hall around here. We don’t have any hot chow, but tell them to give you a box of Cs with turkey loaf. If they give you ham and mother fuckers, tell them I’ll have their asses. OK? I’ll see you again at 1300. You can give me your answer then,” Mr. Bell instructed.

Turning to Grover, Mr. Bell said, “you look a little conflicted too, boy. Do you want some time to decide?”

“Yes, sir,” Grover responded.

Geronimo! I thought.

“OK Grover, go with Baird. Same drill. Be back at 1300,” Mr. Bell said as he turned his head to me. “Giordano, I can see that you’ve already made up your mind. I need you to come into the personnel office and fill out some papers. Stay here. I’ll send a clerk out in a bit. You can have lunch later.”

I was shocked by Bell’s comment. For several moments I felt horrible. I worried about the implication, but I did as Mr. Bell directed. I sat down on the bench and waited for the clerk who would rescue me from the field.

As I watched Baird and Grover walk down a large erosion rivulet that passed for a road on the base camp, I tried again to fathom the teleological import of this experience. Did my decision to accept Mr. Bell's offer reveal a character flaw and demonstrate a lack of courage, or was it just the lightning speed in which I had made up my mind? Was Mr. Bell a siren who had been sent to tempt me and demonstrate the corruption of my true character, or—more likely—was his offer a reflection of the realities of service with elite forces?

I did remember that, while he had a CIB and a Special Forces combat patch, those meant that somewhere in his career he'd left his infantry comrades for the cushy job of a personnel warrant officer. I felt a little better.

Over the next several months, I would learn that in the 173d Airborne, commissioned officers served far briefer tours in line units than enlisted men or NCOs, and often left them for rear jobs with the S-1, S-2, S-3, or S-4 shops in order to punch their ticket. Still, I realized that I had not really paid my dues in Vietnam and that this reprieve was as divinely inspired as it was unearned.

Baird and Grover returned from lunch at 1245. After discussing Mr. Bell's offer, they'd concluded that if either of them turned down this opportunity, someone else in the line company would grab it and not look back.

They accepted Mr. Bell's offer. Over the next several months we all became friends of a sort.

We did have to return to Tuy Hoa to gather our personal gear and sign out of the Fourth Battalion. Our company commander was away somewhere and I would not see him again for several months. The harried acting first sergeant, a shake-and-bake staff

sergeant from instant NCO school, was confused by these events and bid us all a not-so-fond farewell. Geronimo!

As spring turned into summer, I neared my twenty-first birthday at An Khe. Baird became a clerk-typist and worked directly for the battalion sergeant major, which turned out to be a position of immense, informal power. Grover became the driver for the Headquarters Company commander, and I became a jack-of-all-trades. My duties included traveling to the units in the field to pay them casual payments to tide them over until payday. In this latter role, I got to see some combat up close. I had a number of minor adventures and a couple of close calls.

In late March, the 4/503d had recommended me for promotion to Specialist Four, as there were no corporals in the Infantry. After I transferred, the Support Battalion approved that recommendation. In May, my new first sergeant at the headquarters company pinned the new rank on the collar of my green jungle fatigues.

First Sergeant Harold Thomas Barnes was a living legend in the 173d. He was 6'6" or 6'7" and weighed 215-220 lbs. He had to be in his 40s, but he was as fit as any 20-year-old paratrooper. He reminded me a little of Muhammad Ali, but in a fight with the world champ, I'd have bet a year's pay on my first sergeant.

Other first sergeants, master sergeants, sergeants major, warrant officers, and the company commander called him "H.T." The rest of us, including all of the other commissioned officers, called him "Top," for top soldier—an informal title of respect in the Army and Marines.

Top Barnes sported a CIB with a star indicating that he'd seen combat in Korea as well as Vietnam. He had the star of a senior jumper on his jump wings, an RVN Ranger

award for close combat over his right pocket, and an American Ranger tab on his left shoulder. He wore a 173d patch on both shoulders. It was 1968, and he was serving his *third* tour in Vietnam.

I saw him on his way to R&R in Bangkok. It was the only time he wore a khaki uniform. His ribbons revealed a Silver Star with one oak leaf, a Bronze Star with a V-device and two oak leaves, an Army commendation medal with several oak leaves and a V, an Air Medal covered in oak leaves, and a Purple Heart with two oak leaves indicating three separate awards. By contrast, I had a National Defense Service Medal and two ribbons for leaving the comfort of my fraternity and traveling to RVN.

The man was a hero. I was a cherry. Although not well educated, Top Barnes was one of three smartest men I ever met and one of the two wisest. He was a self-taught, highly motivated intellectual. He had a better understanding of literature than some of the battalion clerks with master's degrees in English. The draft had made the Army egalitarian, as officers occasionally had no college experience, and some enlisted soldiers on their two-year commitments were planning a doctoral thesis.

A true renaissance man, Top was the best and most formidable street fighter / martial artist that I ever saw. Ali would not have survived the first round.

Top was not a bully. He never picked on anyone, though he had no reluctance to use corporal punishment when he thought it was merited. At muster formations, he would lay down the law and invite anyone who objected to meet him behind the shit house. No one who knew him, even our biggest and baddest thugs, would ever consider challenging him. Occasionally, a new man, lacking in both intelligence and judgment, would. Top always made short, violent work of the fucking new guy.

Top was a tough soldier. He was also a decent, caring father who loved his men. He had no patience for racial animus from anyone, white or black. I suspect that he'd encountered more than his share of prejudice as a black soldier serving in the South. But he never tolerated racial tensions. He applied his justice in an evenhanded manner.

I've read other reminiscences about the war in RVN. One common theme has always been the racial problems that our soldiers experienced. I am sure that they are true and observed some of it myself. I never saw any in HHC, Support Battalion, because Top Barnes would not permit it.

He was a crack shot with the carbine version of the M-16 rifle, called the Car-15. Near the end of my tour, I watched him kill a North Vietnamese soldier with one bullet to the head from 50 meters, when the NVA sapper walked around the sand bags of a building that we were defending inside the base camp at An Khe. I had the privilege of serving with the some of the finest soldiers in the world over my Army career, and Top Barnes was the best of the best.

Once I got reassigned to the Support Battalion, I found myself constantly running errands for Top. He was unrelenting in his demands, but liberal in his rewards. The first of these occurred on my 21st birthday.

My birthday is in the middle of July. Turning 21 at An Khe did not have the same cachet that it would have, had I still been at ASU in Tempe. If I'd been at school on the magic day, I would have sauntered into the Library or Sand Bar at 12:01 A.M. and flashed a bona fide Arizona driver's license. Like all of my classmates, I would have spent the first hour trying to drink myself into oblivion before the bar closed at 1 A.M.

At An Khe, the 173d had an enlisted men's club, where we could theoretically drink beer. It was a filthy shack with a plywood door and no windows. It always had at least three inches of water on the floor, even in the dry season. It would have been an electrocution hazard, but for the fact that the club had no electricity. No contractor in CONUS would store rusty, obsolete equipment in such a sty.

There was big cooler in the back, but it needed ice to cool things down. Ice was a rare commodity at An Khe in the summer. The EM club would not be an option for my momentous celebration.

Officers and NCOs could buy rationed amounts of beer and booze at the PX. Officers could also get beer, wine, and hard liquor at their club, which even had electricity, cold drinks, beer, and food. Enlisted men, like me, had to have a friend in high places or wait until the EM club could cool down some beer.

I never asked a senior person to buy beer or booze for me. It seemed too much like using the Hawaiian driver's license at the Elbow Room. The irony at An Khe was that the restrictions on alcohol consumption were based on rank, not age—a totally arbitrary and capricious remnant of feudal times.

I woke up at 0500 on my birthday after an unremarkable night. I slept in what we called a hooch, a shack with a bare concrete floor, tin roof, and screened walls with a wooden frame made from used ammunition crates. We surrounded each hooch waist-high with sandbags.

Twenty of us slept in a hooch in rows of double bunks. The bunks were Army-type cots with four-foot metal poles, called bunk adapters, to stack one bed on the other.

Bunk adapters came in handy for bludgeoning rats and for settling personal disputes, paratrooper-style.

We did have electricity in our hooch. Each hooch had a least one sergeant or acting sergeant to keep order. These guys could buy beer in bulk and store it in their little Japanese refrigerators that their extra pay helped them to absorb.

We were not so fortunate. As a Specialist Four on jump status in a combat zone, the Army paid me a basic pay, combat pay, jump pay, foreign duty pay, and a clothing allowance. In 1968, this totaled \$300 each month.

Most of my hooch-mates were former infantry, and the battalion expected us to perform our normal assigned duty and then stand perimeter guard once every third or fourth night. I made a little extra money taking guard for some of the guys who wanted to avoid the duty. On my birthday I woke up thinking I might pull guard that night.

Right after Tet—which those of us without access to the American media thought was an overwhelming victory for the United States—the area around An Khe in the Central Highlands remained relatively calm. The 173d Airborne and the 4th Infantry Division, supported by artillery, Army helicopters, and Air Force close air support had dealt a serious blow to the NVA and VC. By summer, the contacts with the enemy had begun to increase again.

Since it didn't look like I would get a beer for my birthday, I had agreed to stand perimeter guard on a portion of the line defended by the battalion's provisional infantry unit, known as E Company. With the increase in enemy activity, I might be able to raise my rate from 15 to 20 dollars for a night peering into the black jungle across the kill

zone, and sleeping in a bunker between two watchtowers on the leeward side of Hong Kong Mountain.

As it happened, Top Barnes sent his company clerk to find me before I'd had time to shave or finalize the deal. Knowing it was unwise to keep Top waiting, I pulled on my fatigues and sprinted for the hooch that he and the C.O. used as an orderly room.

After gaining admission, I reported correctly. "Top, you sent for me."

"Yeah, Giordano, I need you to run an errand for me."

"Can do, Top!"

"The postal officer, Lieutenant Williams, has to go down to Qui Nhon on Brigade business. Grover will drive him in my jeep. They need someone competent to ride shotgun. All the good troops are busy, so all I have available for this chore is a route-stepper like you. You'll have to go."

"Sure, Top. Piece of cake," I responded.

I'd actually gone along on a couple of convoys in June to Pleiku, which was about the same distance west from An Khe as Qui Nhon was to the east. I understood the drill and what would be expected of me. For an infantryman, convoy duty would not be a challenge, unless of course we got ambushed. There hadn't been a lot of that lately, so I wasn't too worried.

On those other trips, I'd manned a vehicle mounted M-60 machine gun with several 100 round belts of 7.62 ammunition handy. I was competent with the M-60. It was a good weapon with decent range, a fast rate of fire, and good ballistics.

"Top, can I get a note to the armorer to draw an M-60?" I asked seriously.

“What! You expect to encounter Attila the Hun on this little joy ride? Giordano, we haven’t had much VC activity in weeks. The intelligence shows no signs of an NVA build up. You’re going to the beach at Qui Nhon in a large fucking convoy with gun jeeps, a flat top with a duster, and gun ships flying cover. Just draw your personal weapon, shave that scrawny face of yours, break starch for the lieutenant, and try not to embarrass me, son.”

“Top, my personal weapon is a .45. Can I get an M-16?”

“Who assigned you a .45? You’re only a Spec. Four.”

“I think you did, Top.”

“How about an M-14? The armorer has a few of those, we use them for sniper weapons, but we have no snipers in Headquarters Company.”

“That would be perfect, Top. I like the M-14 a whole lot better than the M-16.”

“Me too, Giordano. The M-16A1 sucks. That’s why I have a Car-15,” Top explained with a sly grin. “Anyway, don’t over think this little jaunt. Just make sure the L.T. gets back safely. He’s a leg and only got assigned here after Dak To. He’s due to transfer down to Bien Hoa next month. Colonel Angel likes the lad and would disembowel you if anything happened to him, assuming there’d be anything left after I got through with you.”

“Top, I fully understand.”

“Listen, Tony,” Top said, in a rare use of my first name, “My clerk told me that today’s your birthday. How old are you, now?”

“Twenty-one, Top.”

“OK, listen up. You and Grover get the L.T. to the headquarters in Qui Nhon. He’ll be there all day, until 1400 or 1500. After you drop him off, you and Grover can go to the beach that the NCO club operates there. They have real hamburgers, French fries, and cold beer. You guys can only have three beers each. Understand?”

“Yes, First Sergeant. Wow!”

“Yeah, happy birthday, Tony. Look, there’s a little bar, the Golden Idol. It’s just outside the beach facility. It’s got cold beer too and some of the prettiest girls this side of Tu Do Street in Saigon. Go there after lunch and have a good time. Make sure that no matter what you and Grover do, you are prepared to get the lieutenant back to the return convoy by 1630. If you miss that convoy, it’ll be your ass,” First Sergeant Barnes said as he stuck out his great bear paw of a hand to shake mine.

I was really moved by Top’s gesture and felt privileged that he was looking out for me on my birthday. I grasped his hand and he pressed two folded up military pay certificates into my palm. I looked down and saw two twenty-dollar bills.

“What’s this, Top?” I said, surprised.

“Use that to cover the cost of your birthday celebration. You can buy some beer and maybe a shot of leg, if you’re not too choosy. You can buy Grover a beer, but do not use any of my money to get that little shit head laid. Understand?”

“Wow, Top! I don’t know what to say, ” I responded, getting a little choked up.

“Get the fuck out of my orderly room, you cherry mother, before I assign you to burn shit all afternoon.”

“Yes, Top. Thanks!”

“Giordano, I’ve put you in for promotion to Sergeant. The C.O. agrees. With any luck we can make you an NCO by October. You’ve done a good job. The C.O. contributed half of those MPCs to your birthday celebration. Now, get the fuck out of here. Get yourself squared away and do a good job watching out for Lieutenant Williams. If I see you later tonight, I’ll take you to the NCO club and buy you a real drink.

“Thanks Top. I won’t let you down.”

“If you do, your momma will be real sad.”

All of these years later, its hard to describe the way I felt when I left the orderly room and sprinted back to my hooch to shave and find a cleaner uniform to wear. I hadn’t thought that the company commander or first sergeant thought anything about me. Now two combat paratroopers had contributed their own money and had jury-rigged a detail to give me an opportunity to have a unique experience in a difficult war.

It meant that I had done something right. It meant that they thought I was a soldier.

To a guy who’d dropped out of college on the edge of academic probation, to a young man whose peers at ASU were selecting the courses for their final year, for a man who had demonstrated no ability to succeed, for a person who constantly worried that he was a failure, the affirmation that this gesture demonstrated nearly overwhelmed me.

I’ve been a cry baby all of my life. I won’t deny that because of Top’s kindness and camaraderie, I needed a minute. I will also admit, that because of their faith in me, there wasn’t a man on earth in July of 1968 who was more committed to protecting Lieutenant Williams. He didn’t know it, but I would have willingly died to protect him.

I met Grover outside the orderly room 15 minutes later. He had just finished motor stables that morning and he looked like a ragbag from the results of the maintenance. Like me, he had a .45 caliber automatic pistol on his hip. He also had an M-16A1 next to him in the seat.

While we waited for 2Lt. Williams, Grover and I talked about the sniper variant of the M-14 that I'd been issued. I'd drawn the weapon, five twenty-round magazines, and a bandolier with two hundred rounds. While Jerry and I talked, I loaded the magazines with rounds from the bandolier.

Albeit a bit behind schedule, 2Lt. Williams finally appeared. I'd seen him around the base camp. Before the trip I'd never had cause to speak to him.

Lieutenant Williams was mid-twenties, 10-15 pounds overweight—which really stands out in an airborne unit—and pathologically affable. Since he was chubby and not airborne, I wanted to dislike him. I couldn't because he seemed friendly, oblivious to rank, very intelligent, and funnier than hell. On the trip down, he turned out to be a brilliant historian and a fabulous storyteller. No wonder Colonel Angel liked this guy.

Though we were late for the convoy and a fucking leg transportation major chewed Grover's ass, we found a place in line and started east down Route 19 by 0800. We fell in behind a three-quarter ton truck carrying boxes of who knew what, heading toward An Khe Pass and the coastal plain.

In the spring of 1967, when I was contemplating my fate, I went to the Carl Hayden Library at ASU and read every book I could find about Vietnam. I was certainly no expert on the Annamese culture, the historical dynamics at work in Southeast Asia, or

the geopolitical imperatives driving the current conflict. But I knew what I was getting into before I joined up.

As the convoy motored east along R-19, one of the few paved highways in the country, I understood that we were on a high plateau. In about 10 miles we would negotiate An Khe Pass in order to drop down to the coastal plain. Though I'd flown over the pass in Army helicopters and Air Force transports, this would be my first time on the ground.

Grover had not done much research about the war before he enlisted. He was a very smart guy, but seemed geographically challenged. During our freewheeling discussion with 2Lt. Williams, he revealed that he thought Vietnam was in the southern hemisphere. Conversely, the L.T. had done extensive research on Southeast Asia, far eclipsing my feeble effort.

As we headed toward the pass, Williams expounded at length on the history of Annam, Tonkin, Cochin China, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand. I found it fascinating.

He knew more about the French colonial debacle than anyone I had ever met. I'd read about the battle of Dien Bien Phu, which ended in catastrophe for the French in 1954. For some reason, I'd concluded that after the French surrendered in the north, the war had ended.

"Giordano, that's just not true. The very last battle of the French war was the Battle of An Khe," 2Lt. Williams expounded.

"Really, sir? What happened?"

"After the fiasco at Dien Bien Phu, the French tried to consolidate their forces at Pleiku. The Viet Minh caught a large mobile force on this road and tore them a new

asshole. It was a slaughter. Less than a third of the force made it to Pleiku. The rest are buried along the road,” Williams explained.

“Sir, I know the place you’re talking about,” Grover piped up. “It’s about 10 miles on the other side of An Khe. It’s called Mang Yang Pass. The rumor is that the Viet Minh took no prisoners, killed the wounded, and buried the French Foreign Legionnaires standing up.”

“Jerry, why would Charlie bury somebody standing up?” I asked sarcastically. “Sounds like a war story to me.”

“I don’t know, Tony. That’s all I heard. You can still see the graves along the road. It’s weird. Tony, you’ve been to Pleiku, didn’t you see the graves?”

“Yeah, I did. I didn’t realize that those contained casualties from the last battle. That pass is a bitch. It’s perfect for an ambush. But fortunately it’s in the other direction,” I reminded my jeep mates.

“Well, there’s been lots of fighting around An Khe Pass too. It may not be as dangerous as that place to the west. What did you call it, Grover? Poon Tang Pass?”

Jerry guffawed at the lieutenant’s joke. “No sir, I believe it’s called Mang Yang Pass. Poon Tang Pass is the bar where Tony and I are going after lunch, while we wait for you.”

“The first sergeant told me you men were going to hang out at the NCO beach. What’s this about a bar?”

“Top told Tony about the Golden Idol. I’ve heard about it too. Cold beer and hot women!” Grover chortled.

“Sounds interesting. Maybe I’ll meet you there. It’ll save you a trip to headquarters,” the lieutenant said slyly, waiting to see our reaction.

“No sweat, sir!” Grover said, as he turned and winked at me in the back, while 2Lt. Williams was looking the other way.

About a quarter mile before we entered An Khe Pass, we saw a Korean Army strong point on a little hill to the north of Route 19. It looked about right for a reinforced squad. A very thuggish-looking M-48 Patton Tank squatted behind a prepared position next to the White Horse Division bunker, its 90mm main gun pointed east toward the pass.

“I’m told that these ROKs are the best soldiers in Vietnam,” Williams said.

“Well, sir, they might be after the Airborne and maybe the jarheads,” Grover retorted, slightly piqued.

2Lt. Williams turned and gave Grover a long look. He knew he’d struck a nerve. Pride in the Airborne was a big deal. At An Khe we often fought with the enlisted men of the 1st Cavalry Division, simply because they were legs. I understood that brawling with legs was a tradition that went back to the early days of the paratroopers at Fort Benning and Fort Bragg. We were nothing if not respectful of tradition.

Fighting was fine, but woe to the paratrooper who got his ass kicked in a fair fight with a leg. The beating would be the least of his problems. Hazing by his peers would be relentless and intolerable.

“Grover, I know you’re proud of those wings and you guys are very good, but these Koreans are amazing. I’ve watched them train. They work on hand-to-hand combat

every day. Every one of those soldiers is a brown belt or better,” the Lieutenant said as he pointed at the ROK position to the north.

“I know they’re good, sir. They’re just not as good as us!” Grover said, offering no facts to support his belief.

As we entered the pass, the lieutenant kept up the pleasant banter with Grover. I did sense by the tone, tenor, and substance of some of his comments that service with the Herd had been harder to accept than he wanted to let on. I assumed that he’d taken the harassment in stride in public, but seethed about it in private.

I tuned out of the front-seat conversation. I really have no recollection of it. I got busy watching and listening to what was happening along the road.

An Khe pass is a series of long, steep switchbacks that allows the paved road to come out of the coastal plain and climb into the Central Highlands. While there are times when the road cuts between two highpoints, most of the passage is open to the east.

I could see why it was such a dangerous place, but I had to agree with Grover. An Khe Pass was not as threatening as Mang Yang Pass to the west. Still, we had to be careful as hell. It was comforting that Koreans had established a strong point near the top.

The convoy contained at least 50 vehicles of all types. We had three gun jeeps and two three-quarter ton vehicles that had mounted mini-guns. This was the first time I’d seen that weapon system deployed in that manner. Previously, I had only seen them mounted on Cobras, Huey gun ships, C-47s, and C-130 gun ships.

From An Khe to the pass, we had a Cobra helicopter gunship as our guardian angel. Once we got to the pass, the Cobra left and headed back to An Khe. Two Huey

gun ships from Qui Nhon replaced the Cobra. If Charlie or Nathaniel Victor started anything, they'd be in a world of hurt.

The most comforting thing about the transit down the pass was not our organization, numbers, weapons, or force multipliers. It was the presence of hundreds of Vietnamese along the road, trying to sell every manner of goods and produce. Their presence indicated that Charlie had no plans to attack the pass this morning.

I'd been to market at An Khe village several times since I joined Support Battalion. One of my duties was to fetch the laundry for Headquarters Company. In the village markets, commerce was primitive, boisterous, irritating, loud, frustrating, and fascinating.

I can still remember the bedlam in An Khe Pass with the children running along the road—hectoring the men in the vehicles—with phony Montagnard crossbows and Ho Chi Minh sandals for sale. There were pretty Anamese girls in their traditional Ao Dai pantaloons waiving cold bottles of coke. Older mama-sans, teeth stained and crusted from long association with the mildly hallucinogenic red betel nut, supervised the pandemonium. Old men in the ubiquitous black pajama cooked food, carried bundles, and watched our progress stoically. I don't recall a single military aged boy or man among the hundreds of Vietnamese in the pass that day.

Once we hit the coastal plain, the convoy sped up, and we arrived at the lieutenant's destination at 1000. Grover barely slowed down to let the postal officer out. Williams did tell us that he'd try to get away early and meet us at the Golden Idol after 1400. That would leave plenty of time to take care of his personal business and we would have no trouble making the return convoy.

It was summertime. It would be light until after 2000, but no one wanted to be out on R-19 in a convoy in the Central Highlands after dark. Pickings for Charlie would be too easy.

Grover wanted to go directly to the Golden Idol. We found the place, but it was not open for business and they shoed us away.

We located the beach. The large number of soldiers there surprised me. At An Khe we worked 12 hours a day, seven days a week. We did play a lot of volleyball, but that was at night after chow. Apparently, the forces around Qui Nhon did not have the same work ethic.

Top was right about the food. The hamburgers were delicious. I had three large ones with all of the trimmings. I was 6'0'' and about 160 pounds. I was in superb physical condition with the metabolism of a shrew. Fear of cholesterol, heart disease, clogged arteries, and weight gain were decades off in the future.

Jerry and I didn't get to swim in the South China Sea. There was an infestation of jellyfish around the beach and lifeguards closed it down before noon. It didn't matter. I got to lay on the sand, drink a cold Budweiser, and stand under the beach shower for an obscenely long period of time. What a birthday!

Anticipating a large crowd at the Golden Idol, Jerry pestered me to go back there at 1330. It was overcast, but very hot and extremely muggy. Sitting in a bar and sipping beer seemed like an attractive endeavor.

The Golden Idol was a typical Vietnamese bar that catered to G.I.s. It was a large room, decorated with various paintings, statues, and furnishings in the oriental style. A

large Buddha—painted in garish gold—sat over the center of the bar. The place smelled of beer, mold, chicken, rice, incense, perfume, and charcoal.

The Golden Idol had a bare cement floor, a long bar that no one used, and 30 or 40 tables spread around. The joint sat on the corner of two busy streets. The bartender opened the windows and doors to ventilate the place. Large fans on the ceiling slowly turned, stirring the moist air a bit. Though it was hot outside, it was bearable at a table near the door.

The girls at the bar made their money in two timeless ways. They hustled young soldiers for drinks and they sold their bodies.

In 1968, the official exchange rate between U.S. dollars (in the form of military pay certificates) and Vietnamese piasters was 1 to 118. Soldiers were forbidden to buy anything from the Vietnamese with their MPCs or to use their ration privileges to obtain items from the PX to barter. If we wanted to drink at the Golden Idol, the Command expected us to exchange MPCs for piasters at the 173d Finance Office or at the PX.

Just as they had for tens of thousands of years, soldiers ignored and disobeyed these orders, so that they could fraternize with the local girls. Black Market commerce blossomed throughout the country. The unofficial exchange rate was closer to 1 to 500. Use of MPCs would generate deep discounts for all manner of commerce. Certain items from the PX—like cartons of cigarettes, hard liquor, and cases of beer—were more precious than gold.

When Jerry Grover and I arrived at the Golden Idol, we were the only soldiers there. During the rest of the afternoon some Air Force pilots showed up, but not many soldiers. The bar girls explained that since the Army only paid at the end of the month,

there wouldn't be much action. So we had the undivided attention of several very attractive young women.

I was not a paragon of morality while I was in Vietnam. I took full advantage of every opportunity while I was on R&R. On this particular occasion I did not partake of the generosity of the girls at the bar. I don't know why, since I found one young woman very attractive. She spoke English very well, and I have a deeply flawed Italian temperament.

It may have been that Top Barnes and the C.O. had demonstrated that important people respected me. I didn't want to disappoint them and demonstrate the folly of their trust or judgment.

Instead, I watched Jerry drink three of the beers that Top had approved and two of mine. I let Jerry do that because I reasoned that if he seemed too impaired, I could drive and he could ride shotgun on the return convoy. With all of the security, the Cobras, the gun jeeps, and the Koreans, we would have a nice, quiet trip back to An Khe filled with collegial banter about historical topics.

For the privilege of talking with the girls, we had to buy them drinks every 20-30 minutes. Drinks at the Golden Idol were 1200 piasters each, \$3.00 in MPCs, or two drinks for a pack of cigarettes. A brief, but close, encounter somewhere in the back cost 11,000 piasters, discounted to \$20 MPCs, or a carton of filtered cigarettes.

I did spend \$30 for drinks that afternoon. I did not get laid, so I can't personally relate what it was like in the brothel behind the bar.

At about 1430, Jerry produced two cartons of filtered Marlboros from a waterproof bag that we all carried when we left An Khe. The eyes of the young women at

the table lit up. Jerry picked one of the girls and left me to my own devices for the next hour and a half.

Sitting at the table at the Golden Idol, sipping on a tepid beer and bantering with the bar girls was so pleasant that I realized that it was the very best birthday I could have had. The attractive young bargirl did try to lure me into the back with all types of lurid suggestions.

When these didn't work, she asked if I was married or gay. I tried to convince her that I was neither, just not in the mood. Her association with young American men over the last four years convinced her that she'd been right the first time and that I probably liked boys. She offered to find one for me, but I declined that too.

When it got to be 1530, Jerry hadn't returned and 2Lt. Williams hadn't arrived. I started to stress. We had to be at the assembly point in an hour, or some Transportation Corps officer would have another melt down.

Jerry returned to my table in the bar before 1600. He had the vacuous look of a guy who'd just had his brains screwed out.

"Tony, has the L.T. shown up? We've got to get on the road." Grover stated, as he took a seat across from me.

"Nope. He's got a few minutes. He'll get here," I responded.

"You go in the back?" Grover asked.

"Naw, not in the mood," I answered lamely.

"Tony, that girl was something. I'll have to hit that again, the next time I get to Qui Nhon. I'm a little worried though."

"Why? What's the matter?"

“I couldn’t find a rubber, so I went in bareback.”

“Jerry, that was pretty stupid. These girls are very busy. You better see the medics as soon as we get back. You don’t want to get the clap,” I said, stating the obvious.

“Hey. You don’t think these girls got the black clap, do ya?”

The so-called black clap was a form of gonorrhea, allegedly so virulent that no antibiotic known to man could control it. In June, Top had allowed the battalion’s chief medic, a spec. six, to give us a pep talk at formation. The doc claimed that if we contracted the black clap, we’d be arrested, transported to an island in Cam Rahn Bay, and kept there incommunicado until they found a cure. The Army would lie to our families and claim that we were missing in action.

“Jerry, you don’t believe that bullshit about the black clap, do you?”

“I don’t know. The medics wouldn’t lie to us, would they?”

“Jerry, some of those fuckers are the worst. They’re supposed to do preventive medicine in An Khe village. They actually trade getting laid for giving some of the cuter girls a clean bill of health.”

“Who told you that?”

“A little birdie.”

“Really, Tony, you don’t think I’ll get the black clap? I’d go crazy on that island.”

“Jerry, there’s no island. They command doesn’t want your dick to fall off. They’d have to send you home, and get some other eleven bush to drive the C.O. around An Khe.”

“So, you think I’ll be OK?”

“No, I think you probably have gonorrhea and one of the docs is going to shove a needle in your stupid ass. Speaking of stupid, it’s getting late. Where in the fuck is the L.T.? Top will have my ass if we miss the convoy.

“Tony, I’m allergic to penicillin.”

“Jerry, I don’t care. They’ll give you tetracycline or something else. Where’s Williams?”

Grover and I continued to discuss his serious medical and mental issues for another 20 minutes. I was about to have a stroke, when 2Lt. Williams made his appearance. He walked into the bar, looked around, spotted us, and sauntered over.

“Sir, we got to get going. We’re late as it is,” I said.

“No problem, Giordano. Have a seat. I spoke to the transportation people at HQ. The convoy won’t assemble until 5:30. If we show up by 6:00, we’ll be OK.”

“Are you certain, sir?” Grover asked. “I’m pretty sure that we’re going to be late.”

“Look, Specialist Grover,” the lieutenant said, pulling rank, “I spoke with the transportation officer personally. We’ve got time. I’d like to spend some of that with a lovely young woman, so that I can help improve American/Vietnamese relations.”

Jerry looked at me and shrugged. The lieutenant was convinced that we were OK. I really couldn’t do anything about it. He seemed to know what he was talking about.

Williams ordered a San Miguel. While they went to fetch it, he chatted up the bargirl with whom I’d spent the afternoon. After some high level negotiation, he produced a large roll of piasters and gave her 12,000.

She winked at me and smiled as she got up from the table. She took 2Lt. Williams by the hand and led him into the back.

“The lieutenant is going to screw your woman,” Grover challenged with a leer.

“She’s not my woman. She’s a hooker,” I corrected.

“I think you liked her,” Jerry taunted.

“Purely platonic. I liked her on an intellectual level. Jerry, have you ever had anything more than a tawdry, physical relationship with a female? You know, something meaningful and special?”

“Tony, you’re weird. You got a girl back home or something?”

“Nope. Burned all my bridges.”

“Listen, bud,” Grover continued. “We could get greased anytime. I might not live to see my Honorable Discharge. We’re about half way through our tour. A lot of shit can happen in the next six months.”

“Your point is?”

“Tony, I’m getting laid every opportunity I have. I’ll worry about the clap right before I DEROS back to the world.”

“OK, but if your dick falls off, don’t say I didn’t tell you to watch out,” I said enjoying Jerry’s discomfort.

It was a little after 1700 when we next saw the lieutenant. He was a bit disheveled and red in the face, like a lobster after a vigorous mating session. We gathered up all of our gear, and went out in the street and found our jeep. Everything was squared away, so we sped off to the rendezvous point to catch up with the convoy returning to An Khe.

I had been led to believe that the return convoy would be smaller, 25–30 vehicles including gun jeeps. That was still plenty big, especially if we had the same kind of air cover.

When we reached the rendezvous point, there was no convoy.

I cannot describe my feelings. I knew we should have left an hour earlier.

The circumstances shook the lieutenant. He swore that we were on time. He thought maybe we were in the wrong place.

“Sir,” Grover began. “Qui Nhon is a small town. There’s only one road west. This has got to be it. This is where the convoys form up. I’ve been down here three times. I’m sure we’re in the right spot.”

“We’ll see, Specialist,” was the only comment that Williams could muster.

We wasted another 20 minutes on the lieutenant’s wild goose chase. Eventually, we found a checkpoint. The NCO in charge of the security detail confirmed that the convoy left nearly 90 minutes earlier.

“They travel pretty slow, maybe we can catch up,” 2Lt. Williams offered.

“Sir, if they didn’t run into trouble, even traveling at convoy speed, they’re almost to An Khe already,” Grover observed.

“Look guys,” the lieutenant started out affably. “We can’t stay here. We have to get back tonight. I’m supposed to meet with the battalion commander.”

“Sir, do you want us to go to An Khe alone?” Grover asked, as if the idea were the stupidest thing he’d ever heard.

“Yeah. I do. It’ll be all right. I’ll take full responsibility,” Williams stated.

That will be mighty fucking comforting if we get smoked, I thought.

With all of the vacillating about the convoy, it was nearly 1900 hours when we set out on R-19, west across the coastal plain toward An Khe Pass. It was still overcast and dreary, but we had 90 minutes of light. If we went all out, we could make the 40 miles to

An Khe in plenty of time. The jeep had a governor to limit engine speed and could only go 50 miles an hour, but it was mathematically possible to get back to the battalion before full dark.

I pulled the twenty-round magazine from my M-14, checked it, and reseated it in the magazine well. I took the other four magazines from my waterproof bag and stuffed them inside my fatigue shirt. I hadn't brought any load bearing equipment, so I didn't have ammunition pouches, except for the two spare magazines for my .45 Colt, semi-automatic pistol. I checked those as well. I did not have a round in the chamber of either of my weapons.

As we drove through the little hamlets and past the rice paddies on the plain, I realized that the lieutenant had heard 5:30 p.m., when his transportation buddy had said 1530. 1530 is 3:30 p.m. It was a mistake of 2 hours. I wanted to yell at Williams and tell him what a dumb motherfucker he was. If we got back safely, I didn't want to spend the next six months in Long Binh Jail. So I just kept my mouth shut and eyes open.

Unfortunately, once the American military got off the road, the Vietnamese farmers and peasants felt they had a right to use a thoroughfare in the heart of their own country for their own business. As a result of the late traffic, it took us over an hour to reach the bottom of An Khe Pass. I looked at my watch, and it was 2015.

Normally, we'd still have nearly an hour of light, but the cloud cover created a premature dusk. It was getting very dark. We were 12–15 miles from An Khe.

The darkness, itself, was seriously disquieting, but that wasn't the worst. Not by a long shot.

Where there had been hundreds of people on the road, selling and bartering this morning, now there was no one. Where there had been stalls from which the Vietnamese had sold their goods, there was nothing, not a trace. I had seen small trucks, scores of cyclos—motorbikes with passenger compartments on the back—an old French Citroen sedan, and several bicycles. Now there were no other wheeled vehicles anywhere along the road. It got darker.

“Lieutenant!”

“Yes, Giordano,” Williams responded, as he half-swiveled to his left in the front seat of the jeep.

“Sir, we’ve got a problem,” I said as I pulled back the operating handle on the M-14 and let it slide forward, chambering a round.

“Specialist! I didn’t give you permission to lock and load! Be careful! You could accidentally shoot me!”

“Sir, have you noticed that there are no other people along this road? Do you remember how it looked this morning?” I reminded the lieutenant as Grover started us up the steep grade.

“So what?” Williams responded. “Maybe they all went home for dinner. I don’t see the import.”

“Sir,” Grover added. “Tony’s right. This could be serious. I’ve been up and down this road, both ways from An Khe. I’ve never seen it so deserted. Not a light or a flicker of a light. It’s like all the gooks have disappeared.”

I never liked the way some of the Americans referred to the Vietnamese. I did not have the same low opinion of them as some of my peers. I never used that term, but in this situation I did not respond to Grover's ethnocentrism.

"Grover, slow down a bit," the lieutenant ordered, his voice cracking ever so slightly.

As Jerry drove on, the lieutenant checked his own .45 and racked the slide, locking and loading. I did the same with my sidearm. I pulled Jerry's M-16 from the front and loaded it for him.

"Giordano! Make sure that weapon is on safe," Williams directed, his voice up two decibels.

"Always, sir!"

"Tony, take my piece and rack it, too," Grover said, as he handed me his .45 without taking his eyes of the road.

I took his pistol, and pulled the mag to ensure that it was fully loaded. I reseated it in the butt of the weapon, racked the slide, and moved the safety into position with the hammer back.

"OK, Jerry, it's cocked and locked. Be careful," I said, as I handed it back. Grover holstered the pistol, but left the flap unsecured.

It got so dark, so fast that I couldn't believe it. It was almost like God had thrown a celestial blanket over An Khe Pass. There were no stars and no moon. Jerry had turned on the headlights a moment earlier. Now, he snapped them off.

"Grover, what are you doing?" Williams asked. "You'll crack us up for sure!"

"Sir, we're sitting ducks with the lights on. We're too big a target," Jerry said.

The lieutenant did not respond. Grover slowed the jeep down to a relative crawl, so we could stay on the road. Traveling the pass without lights could cause us to go over an edge. That would be almost as bad as being ambushed.

Except for emergencies involving my children, I have never been so scared. I was sure that Charlie, Nathaniel Victor, Attila the Hun, or some other armed enemy hid in the hills above us and had my head in his sights.

I knew the VC and NVA did not take prisoners. I was pretty sure that I'd rather die than be a prisoner. Death—and not capture—seemed to hover over the three of us.

I was certain that the enemy was there. Every hair on the back of my neck stood at attention. My skin crawled. I had trouble controlling my heart rate, breathing, and bodily fluids.

We'd gone about 20% of the way through the Pass when I asked Jerry to stop. He did. We idled quietly. We all listened silently. We heard nothing. There were no military sounds, like handling of weapons, movement through terrain, squeaky equipment, footfalls, breathing, nothing. More ominously, there were no natural sounds. No birds, insects, animals, nothing.

I've seen Class B movies where the hero says, "It's quiet out there, maybe a little too quiet." Then an expendable character gets an arrow or spear, and a general attack occurs. That's how this felt. Except, no general attack developed. No arrow whistled into a chest. No bullet sped through the night. No rocket-propelled grenade hit our jeep.

I simply sat in my seat, my rifle in my hands, my finger on the front safety of the trigger guard. I looked, listened hard, and smelled the air. Nothing.

I was sweating more than I ever had in my life. My undershirt was soaked and wet. It stuck to my chest like a tacky cellophane cover.

A few moments later Grover depressed the clutch, shifted into first gear, and we continued up the grade. Going west, the upward incline seemed steeper than when we negotiated the pass earlier in the morning. Two switchbacks later, Grover stopped.

“Did you hear that?” He whispered.

“What?” Williams asked quietly.

“Listen!” Jerry insisted.

Grover had his M-16 in his hand. 2Lt. Williams had his .45 in his right hand. I shifted my M-14. We listened. No one spoke. I could hear Williams’ stomach gurgling. I could detect no sounds from the Pass. None. Nothing.

The silence around us was deafening. In everyday life, people can tune out and ignore all kinds of sounds. That’s not how this was. There was no sound to hear. The complete absence of sounds, other than our jeep and ourselves, was terrifying. What omniscient force out there had the power to squelch the sounds of the insects, snakes, birds, frogs, and lizards?

We moved on again, but we stopped at least three more times. As our eyes grew used to the dark, we were able to see a little more of the road in the pale ambient light reflecting off the clouds.

As we got closer to the top, we did not get more confident. It was almost like a dream where you continue to run but can never quite reach your goal. We finally did get to the top of the pass. Unfortunately, we still had 10 miles to go over a rolling road to get to An Khe.

When we got abreast of the ROK strong point, it was dark and foreboding, and looked deserted. I was pretty sure the Koreans were there, but they had superb light and sound discipline too. It was so dark that we could not make out the profile of the M-48 tank that we had seen earlier in the day.

Jerry didn't say a word, but he stomped the gas on the jeep and sped without lights toward An Khe. It was like riding a roller coaster in a bat cave. I did not have a watch with a luminous dial, so I don't know how long it took us to get through the pass. My best guess is that it took well over an hour.

Not 15 minutes after we left An Khe Pass, we could see the lights of the perimeter of the base camp up ahead. Williams wanted the headlights turned on, but Grover reminded our postal officer that many successful ambushes occurred as the unit was about to re-enter its perimeter. We traveled in darkness until we were 500 yards from the entrance.

It took us awhile to safely approach the perimeter and get inside. Once we did, an airborne major, whom I'd never seen, chewed all three of us out. Apparently, Colonel Angel was pissed. He could not believe that we were so stupid as to travel at night, unescorted, and without a radio.

The lieutenant reported to the major that the road had been clear, that we had taken reasonable precautions, and that we'd have been back much sooner except he had to deal with a couple of jumpy, over-cautious, timid paratroopers. If he had been an enlisted man, I would have punched him in his fat, leg mouth. I was already pissed at him. I decided that his friendliness was a façade and that he was just another asshole.

Since we were very late getting the jeep back to the motor pool, Grover asked me to help him clean it up so the motor sergeant could inspect it. Although we had only driven the jeep 80-90 miles, we had to change the oil, re-lube it, and wash it. We didn't finish until 0100.

When I got back to my hooch, almost everyone was sleeping. I found my rack, ensured that there were no mosquitoes inside my netting, pulled back the poncho liner that I used for a blanket, and jumped in. I had to get up at 0500 and face the wrath of Top Barnes.

I slept fitfully. I dreamt, but even then I couldn't remember the dream.

At almost exactly 0500, the company clerk was shaking my rack.

"Tony, Top wants you up at the orderly room. Now!"

"Airborne!" I responded.

I jumped into my fatigues and laced my jungle boots. I found my baseball cap, with the jump wings and Sp/4 rank symbol.

I suppose I won't be getting those three stripes anytime soon, I thought.

It was just starting to get light in the east, when I reported to Top.

"Giordano, please tell me that the rumor that you missed the convoy and drove from Tuy Hoa to An Khe in the dark is the figment of some mad man's imagination."

"First Sergeant, that is not a rumor. It's true," I admitted.

"Why did you miss the fucking convoy back here? Whose hair-brained idea was it to drive up R-19 in the fucking dark? I know you're not an imbecile. Why would you act like one?"

"I have no excuse, First Sergeant."

“Stop calling me that. You sound like a sniveling sycophant. I hate that.”

“OK, Top. I still have no excuse.”

“Giordano, why were you all late?”

I hesitated. If I told the truth, everyone would know the lieutenant put us in jeopardy so he could get laid. True or not, he would be my enemy. Col. Angel allegedly liked this guy. I could end up burning shit for the next six months. On the other hand, if I didn't answer, Top might be mad enough to kick my ass. In any event, I'd be lucky not to get some trumped up Art. 15. It would be a miracle if kept my rank. Forget promotion.

“Top, if I explain all of this, it will just make everything worse. I'll take my beating like a man,” I said, hoping Top would take that offer figuratively and not respond literally.

The first sergeant's expression changed from anger to mild reproach.

“Son, you are something. I guess you're a stand-up guy. You got the stones to risk getting me pissed at you to protect that leg, tub-of-lard lieutenant. Grover spilled the beans 30 minutes ago. Geez, what a cluster fuck that was last night!”

“Jerry told you what happened?” I asked.

“Of course. He's scared shitless that I'll send his ass back to Fourth Battalion. He's gotten used to the ...” Top's explanation was interrupted by the ringing of the field telephone.

As Top picked up the phone and listened, the silence in the room allowed me to hear the distant sound of gunfire crackling and far off explosions to the east. I also began to notice a commotion in the camp. There wasn't one distinct sound, but several. Then I heard the sound of helicopters starting up down at the airfield.

Top began a series of “Yes, sirs,” into the phone. I could recognize helicopters just by their sound. All of us had picked up the knack. Cobra gun ships took off, flew right over us, and headed east. Two minutes later the 155 battery down beyond the airfield opened up and began a long course of fire. I could hear other artillery batteries firing. Something big was up.

Top put down the phone.

“Well, I’ll be damned! You are one incredibly lucky mother!”

“What’s happening Top?”

“The ROKs were moving one of their battalions through the pass this morning, when a battalion, maybe a regiment, of NVA ambushed them. That’s the fight you hear to the east. The C.O. told me that there’s heavy casualties among the Koreans.”

“No, shit!” I said. *Mother fuck, I was right!* I thought.

“We haven’t had anything this bold in six months. The ROKs will not take this lying down. It’s bold, but Charlie is exposed in those hills. We might be able to clean his clock.”

“Then, I was right. They were there all along.”

“You were right about what?” Top asked.

“When we got to An Khe Pass last night, Top, I knew something was up. The place was deserted. Didn’t seem right. Top, I was scared to death. We couldn’t see or hear a thing.”

“Tony, these people have been fighting invaders for a thousand years. The North Vietnamese are superb troops. You couldn’t see or hear them, but hundreds of them were there. They had to be, to set such a deadly trap by early this morning.”

At that moment I had an epiphany. In my mind's eye, I could see the face of a senior NVA officer. He'd brought his men down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, across the breadth of Vietnam to An Khe Pass to ambush a ROK battalion. He'd watched as we labored up the pass. We must have looked pathetic to the enemy as we stopped, waited, and listened.

"Top, they must have been tempted beyond belief to grease all three of us."

"Yeah, I'm sure. But you fuckers were small potatoes. They had something much bigger in mind," Top explained.

"What puzzles me," Top continued, "is that the NVA sent at least a battalion of their regulars to ambush the ROKs. Usually, they try everything they can to avoid the ROKs. So, this might be the start of something big."

"What do we do now, Top?" I asked.

"Giordano, we provide combat support to whatever units in the Herd get involved in that mess. Otherwise, go get cleaned up and report for duty."

"That's it, Top?"

"That's it, Tony. C'est La Guerre."

For the next two-and-a-half hours I could hear the battle rage in the east. I never got to see the result. Our command got reports, but they didn't filter down to my modest level. I heard all the rumors, and Top did fill me in with some of what he learned over the next few days.

Based on what I pieced together, I'm confident that a reinforced battalion of NVA regulars infiltrated the hills in An Khe Pass on the night of my birthday. As we suspected, when they arrived, the good Vietnamese peasants lit out for safer ground.

That means that they could easily have had 500 to 600 combatants in those hills. After the battle, the Koreans claimed a body count of 312. When the ROKs counted coup, they were far more modest, conservative, and accurate than the politically motivated Americans. They also claimed that they found scores of blood trails and other signs that the NVA carted off wounded and dead when they withdrew.

As far as I could tell, the Koreans never told anyone what their own casualties were. I suspect that they never revealed them to the American command structure.

I believe the Koreans took a major hit, though, because they took reprisals in many of the villages around the pass. They were still conducting these vengeance operations into the fall of 1968. We heard a rumor—gossip really—that the ROK squad on duty at the top of the pass had only two survivors out of twenty-one men.

For the rest of July, I struggled to make sense of the event. In high school, the Jesuits had assigned the story of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. In that tale, a priest is negotiating a trail in the mountains of Peru 60 or 70 years after the conquest by Pizarro. As he approaches a hanging bridge over a gorge, he watches in horror as the bridge fails and several people fall hundreds of feet to their deaths. In the aftermath, the priest investigates the lives of the deceased to see if there is some common denominator that explains why they were on the bridge when it failed, while others—like him—were spared. Of course, he fails to discover the Divine plan, and for his efforts, the Dominicans put him to death as a heretic for having the effrontery to try to understand God.

Despite the risk of the Army version of the Spanish Inquisition, I could not let the issue rest.

Grover told me that he could explain the whole business in one sentence: “We were the luckiest mother fuckers in ‘Nam.” While demonstrably true, it wasn’t enough for me.

Col. Angel sped up the timetable to transfer 2Lt. Williams. He was gone before the end of July to a new assignment in Saigon.

It fell to me to unravel this conundrum. I wouldn’t let it be. After giving it much thought, I concluded two important points.

The first was that the NVA commander did not act out of some magnanimous motive to spare a vulnerable foe. Rather, he coldly calculated that the three bumbling idiots on the road were a pathetic and unimportant prize. I felt grateful to be alive, but it sorely rankled me to realize that I had lived only because I was not a worthy adversary.

Secondly, and most importantly, all three of us knew that Charlie and Nathaniel Victor were in those hills. It’s not like we drove through the killing zone without detecting the enemy. We had plenty of evidence, and we had sensed his presence.

I should have reported to someone when we returned. I should have made someone in authority debrief me to review the facts that I had witnessed. I don’t pretend that anyone would have believed me, but I would have done my duty.

I should have gone to Top. Maybe we could have alerted someone, and a bunch of Korean boys would still be alive. I’ve never forgiven myself for my dereliction.

In August, life went back to normal at An Khe. This means that it was mostly tedious details, punctuated by a mortar attack, a rocket attack, a perimeter probe, harassing fire from Hong Kong Mountain, and the occasional infiltrator with satchel charges and hand grenades.

I didn't make sergeant in October, but Top did pin my stripes on my collar right before Thanksgiving. I was now Sergeant Giordano. I don't think I ever had a more important promotion.

My time in Vietnam was coming to an end, and I didn't have a class date for OCS at Benning. Personnel did give me a set of orders, directing me back to Fort Polk to be cadre at the Advanced Infantry School.

I hated Fort Polk, Tigerland, Leesville, and most of eastern Louisiana, so I arranged to extend my tour for a couple of months, until I could go straight to OCS. Hanging around An Khe as a buck sergeant and supervising details of all sorts was much better than anything at Polk.

In March 1969, while I was on my extension, I took a detail of four enlisted men to Saigon with a Finance Corps First Lieutenant. Our job was to pick up the MPCs to pay the troopers of the Herd at the end of the month. The Army had a compound at Ton Son Nhut Air Base, where they stored the money.

The trip was a boondoggle and a thin excuse to give us all an R&R. We got to spend three days touring Saigon and hanging out in the bars, doing what soldiers do. Kipling must have been thinking of my men and me when he talked about soldiers in barracks not being plaster saints.

We stayed at a hotel in the Cholon District of Saigon. By American standards, it would have been a Grade A flop house. To us, with its beds, sheets, bathrooms, toilets, showers, and hot water, it was Monaco. It did have a bar on the rooftop, 13 stories above the street. After 2200 curfew, we would assemble at the bar, drink the Vietnamese beer,

interact with the girls, and watch the helicopters, gunships, and artillery work on the outskirts of the city. It was a light show, the likes of which I have never seen again.

On the last night, I woke up at 0230 when I heard the unmistakable whump of an exploding 122mm rocket. I'd heard plenty of them at An Khe. I went to the window of my room on the 11th floor of the hotel and looked out.

I watched vacantly, literally scratching my backside, as a second rocket hit two or three miles away, then another exploded near the second.

In the next instant, a fourth rocket with 15 pounds of explosives made a direct hit on the fourth floor of my hotel. The explosion took out the corner of the building and set the fourth and fifth floors on fire.

The force of the explosion shredded my window. It hurled me back across the room, landing on my ass. While there was glass everywhere and I thought I had broken my tailbone, I was otherwise unhurt. I quickly dressed, grabbed my weapon, and stood futilely at port arms at my window, posing no threat whatsoever to the NVA who had sent these rockets from 10-12 miles away.

Like good paratroopers, my men and some of their evening guests, assembled in my room as we tried to figure out what to do. The fire had caused thick, black, unbreathable smoke to block the only fire escape. We were trapped on the 11th floor.

We spent a crazy, weird couple of hours thinking that we'd die in the hotel fire. Without recounting all of our efforts to save ourselves, which in retrospect look like insane antics and stupid bumbling, we waited. The fire eventually burned itself out without spreading above the Seventh Floor. At about 0730, we were able to walk out of the hotel, relatively unharmed.

This close call got my attention. When I got back to An Khe, I stormed into the personnel office to check the status of my OCS class date. It was then that I learned that the Support Battalion commander had rescinded my transfer to OCS at the request of First Sergeant H.T. Barnes.

I couldn't fucking believe it. Throwing all caution and common sense to the wind, I ran down to the orderly room and demanded a meeting with Top.

When he called me back to the cubbyhole that passed for his office, he knew I was pissed, and he obviously knew why.

"Sgt. Giordano, come in, sit down, and shut up," he instructed as I walked into his tiny space. "I take it that you've heard about OCS?"

"Top, what in the fuck is going on? They told me that you got the new battalion commander to rescind my assignment to OCS. What did I do? Are you still pissed about that fiasco at An Khe Pass?"

"An Khe Pass? What does that have to do with anything, Tony?"

"I fucked up and didn't report the possible ambush. Koreans got killed. It's my fault, so you must not feel that I'm good enough to be an officer."

"Jesus! Son, that business at An Khe Pass is ancient history. If I thought you'd fucked up, you'd be a PFC or a Private and not a Sergeant. That shit has nothing to do with my decision."

"Top, will you tell me what I did, then. You had to know how much this means to me."

“I do, Tony. I actually do. Look, you will make a fine officer some day. I would be proud to serve with you. But if I let you go to OCS now, you will wind up a failure. You have a little over two years in the Army. I have almost 24.”

“I don’t understand, Top.”

“Giordano, do you know what a RIF is?”

“No, Top.”

“It’s a reduction in force. RIFs happen after every major war when the overall manpower gets reduced. Career types in the officer corps want to stay on, but there aren’t enough slots. In those circumstances, the Army gets to choose whether an officer stays, gets discharged, or if he’s a mustang with former enlisted time, gets sent back to his highest enlisted grade. Look, President Nixon is trying to negotiate a peace. I saw this same shit in Korea. In three years, we’ll be out of Nam. I’m guessing that they’ll stand down the Herd and reduce airborne forces all over the world.”

“How does that affect me?”

“Tony, by your own admission you have less than two years of college. I’m sure you’d do fine in OCS. But you don’t qualify for degree completion programs. By the time you get your degree, they’ll RIF you. You’ll be a former first lieutenant. You could be the oldest buck sergeant leading a fire team in the 82d Airborne. That’s not for you.”

“Top, isn’t that my decision?” I asked and pleaded.

“No, son, it’s not. It’s mine. I’ve made up my mind. Go back to Polk. Push troops for a few months. Get out of the Army. Go back to college with your savings and the G.I. Bill. If you want to be an officer so badly, take ROTC. Get your degree. Prepare yourself properly to lead these wonderful men. That’s the way it has to be.”

I was so angry, that I could barely speak. Who was Barnes to make these decisions? It turned out that there was nothing that I could do. That is, nothing involving OCS.

I called in every favor that I could muster and found a sympathetic ear in personnel. I got the orders to Polk cancelled and managed to get reassigned to Japan. I did not re-enlist, so I only served nine months in Tokyo.

I returned to Arizona State in 1970, changed my major to History, and focused on getting my degree as quickly as possible. I took as many hours as I could wheedle from the administration. With full semester loads and correspondence course on the side, I graduated with honors in 18 months.

I applied to 20 law schools, and got nine rejections before the first acceptance. The semester of 0.00 is on the first page of my transcript to this day. I guess the nuns at St. Francis Xavier Grammar School were right about my permanent record.

I was so bitter at Top Barnes that I declined ROTC. I had no intention of returning to the Army, or any armed force for that matter.

I ended up leaving Arizona in 1971 to attend law school in Texas. The first time the Army, Air Force, and Navy Judge Advocate recruiters came to campus, I ignored them and went to the closest bar off campus and got toasted with my veteran friends.

By the end of my second year in law school, I'd received my final honorable discharge from the inactive reserves. I thought the Army was years behind me.

In July of 1974, almost exactly six years after the incident at An Khe, I met an Army JAG on campus. He was taking a course for an advanced degree in the law. I was

taking the review course for the bar exam. We talked a lot and got to be friends. He eventually asked me to sit for an interview.

In August 1974, he swore me in as an Army first lieutenant in the Judge Advocate Generals Corps. The Army called me to active-duty after Texas published the bar results. They gave me an assignment to the 82d Airborne Division as a Captain. I can assure you that a promotion, even one that takes six years, from buck sergeant to Captain is a big deal.

After the Basic Course in Charlottesville, I settled into my assignment at Bragg. I showed up at the 82d, still a cherry jumper. I rectified that little problem on Wednesday of the first week at Bragg.

As a rookie lawyer and the most junior captain in the office, the Staff Judge Advocate assigned me to represent several individual officers who were responding to the Army's initiative to reduce its force. A major that I represented got reduced to staff sergeant. A lieutenant colonel became a chief warrant officer 2, but only because he'd been a pilot. Most of my clients were discharged, against their wishes, with the thanks of a grateful nation because there simply was no place for them to go in the smaller Army.

Top Barnes had been right. If I'd gotten my commission in 1969, I'd be looking for work. As it was, I had my bachelor's degree, a law degree, a commission to Captain, and a bright career. I told you that he was smart and wise.

In the ever-shrinking Army Airborne, Bragg became a magnet for paratroopers who wanted to stay on jump status. So, it wasn't a complete surprise that I ran into Command Sergeant Major Barnes.

Barnes had become the Sergeant Major of the Second Battalion of the 325th Infantry Regiment, a unit in the Second Brigade of the 82d Airborne. I ran into him jogging on Bastogne Boulevard.

I spotted him from two blocks away and had a hell of a time catching up to him. When I pulled abreast, he looked over at me. I don't think he recognized me at first. He had touched so many lives that his protégés probably sprang out of the ether all of the time. He had to be used to it.

We were in running shorts and t-shirts. No rank. I had the advantage, though, because enlisted men jogged past and addressed him reverently as Sergeant Major.

We stopped out front of 2d Brigade Headquarters and chatted. About 30 seconds into my introduction, the light bulb went on. He recognized me. That, itself, was an honor.

“So, Giordano, you stayed in the Airborne. How come I haven't seen you around Bragg?”

“I just got here. I'm assigned to the JAG office.”

He looked at me for a long minute, sizing me up. “So, you took my advice, then, didn't you? You finished school! Where'd you go to law school?”

“Yes, Sergeant Major. I took your advice. Went to law school in Texas. You were right as usual. I don't know how to thank you. I came on active duty as a Captain. That's just about where I'd be if I had gone to OCS.”

“Except some moving van would be backing up to your quarters, and you'd be on your way to the unemployment line.”

“Sergeant Major, you're right again.”

“Captain Giordano, sir, I would appreciate it if you would call me H.T. All of my friends do.”

I was stunned and moved. I was at a loss for words. I kind of looked away.

“Sir, I forgot how emotional you get. Don’t get all soggy on me. Come over for dinner this weekend. I’ll introduce you to Sissy and the kids.”

“H.T., I don’t know how to thank you.”

“I do. Tony, sir, I’ve always had faith in you, more than you had in yourself. Just be the best officer that you can be. That’s thanks enough. You done good, son. Just keep it up.”

“I won’t you let you down H.T.”

“You never have, son, but if you did, your momma would be very sad.”