

PROVE MY SOUL

Another Side to the Vietnam War

BRIAN M. BIGGS



Hellgate Press

Ashland, Oregon

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*For everyone who was touched by the Vietnam War and
the American War (how the war is known in Việt Nam).*

What Others Are Saying about *Prove My Soul*:

“In PROVE MY SOUL, Marine Lieutenant Brian M. Biggs takes us to the front lines, not of a shooting war, but of the battle for the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people. The story that Biggs pieces together straddles decades, and it is full of wry humor and unintended consequences. It is the story of Biggs’ persistent effort to breach the barriers of language and cultural differences, and to understand what really happened inside the fog of war. Biggs is an honest narrator with a big heart, his prose marches smartly along, and PROVE MY SOUL gives us a remarkable look at a seldom seen side of the Vietnam War.”

—Stevan Allred, author of *The Alehouse at the End of the World*

“PROVE MY SOUL is a vivid new look at an American veteran's relationship with Vietnam and the war he was swept up in more than 50 years ago. This is not a tale about mighty global forces clashing in a jungle. Rather it is the story about one man determined to make sense of it all—a half-baked war, unlikely friendships, and a lifelong enchantment with Vietnam and all its complexities. Come for the soul-searching and stay for the food. You can't read this book without wanting to finish it off with a big bowl of noodles!”

—Wendy Willis is a poet and essayist living in Portland, Oregon. Her second book of poems, *A Long Late Pledge*, won the DorothyBrunsman Poetry Prize. Her first book of poems, *Blood Sisters of the Republic*, was published by Press 53 in 2012. Her latest book is *These Are Strange Times My Dear: Field Notes from the Republic*.

“Marine Lieutenant Brian M. Biggs served in Vietnam as a motor transport officer, and ran his unit’s Civic Action Program. He built additional classrooms for an over-crowded school, taught English, and made Vietnamese friends who would welcome him back into their lives 34 years later. This is the story of those friendships, and of the richly rewarding return trips that revealed the dark complications for the villagers that came from having a friend in the US Marines. There are many memoirs of the Vietnam war; PROVE MY SOUL is a tender and illuminating story of healing and connection.”

—Joanna Rose is the author of *Little Miss Strange*

“Most American soldiers had little human contact with Vietnamese. But soldiers in Civic Action Teams were the exception, often deployed to teach English or to bring medical care into the countryside. In the midst of war, some of them found friends. Lieutenant Brian Biggs’ memoir is a portrayal of kindness both in his wartime past and his return visits as a 60-year old veteran.”

—John Balaban, author of *Remembering Heaven's Face*

“Victory, that glorious hoped-for result in war! It’s not what comes to mind when contemplating the American military struggle in Vietnam. However, in PROVE MY SOUL, former Marine Lieutenant Brian M. Biggs records an experience of personal growth and vision beyond the fiery overkill, political agony and moral depression of the war years in Southeast Asia. At the heart of Biggs’ story is a lesson in the basics of fruitful and redeeming human contact. Against the background of distant explosions, gunfire, and his assignment as a Motor Transport Officer, the former college football player finds himself working in the American campaign ‘to win the hearts and minds’ of the South Vietnamese people. While the success of that campaign remains at least dubious, Biggs’ experience teaching English to the faculty and students at Hoa My Elementary School began—through contact and friendships—a blossoming of vision and cultural exploration that can be seen as a personal triumph that continues to the present. PROVE MY SOUL is an exemplary expression of the power of respectful contact between cultures and individual human beings.”

—Harold Johnson, author of *The Fort Showalter Blues*, a novel, and two books of poetry: *Article. II. The Gallery* and *Citizenship*

“At the University of Washington in the ’60s, Brian M. Biggs was a different kind of dude, playing football and majoring in drama. But the Marines sent him to Vietnam and asked him to ‘win the hearts and minds’ of Vietnamese people. Now, five decades later, the story of his tour of duty and his travels back to Vietnam to reconnect with his friends will win the hearts and minds of readers.”

—Larry Colton, author of *Goat Brothers*, *Counting Coup*, *No Ordinary Joes*, and *Southern League*.

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Author's Note

WHEN I BEGAN writing this memoir in 2001, some of the events had taken place over thirty years in the past. Many of them were still in my memory bank but there were others that needed clarity. After my first trip back to Vietnam in October, 2001, the memoir began to take shape. Much of my information came from the Super 8 movies I took during my tour of duty in Vietnam, May 1966 to May 1967, my letters home, the University of California at Berkeley Writing Correspondence Course I took while in Vietnam, and conversations with those Marines who were stationed with me at MASS-2 in Danang.

Once I completed three trips back to Vietnam, the second, for the Tet celebration in January/February 2004, and the third in May 2006, I had enough information to put together a story. There were dozens of photos, tape recordings, diaries for each trip, and conversations with my Vietnam friends. Mr. Hoan and Miss Xuan provided many stories about my Civic Action work at Hoa My Elementary School.

Three of Mr. Hoan's grandchildren have given me tremendous support answering questions and providing information about Vietnamese culture. In 2001 they each spoke fluent English. Song Ha, who was in high school that year, is now a Lecturer at the University of Science and Technology in Danang. Hanh Quyen who was also in High School in 2001 now works as the Sales

Manager for Ba Na Golf Course in Danang. She is fluent in Chinese, English, and Vietnamese. Hanh Dung was a Freshman in College in 2001 and is now working at Danang University.

It has been a long journey with its ups and downs but the journey had wonderful highlights: Reading events where I could share some of my poems about the experiences I had in Vietnam, or prose stories taken right out of my memoir. But it is indeed an honor to have the memoir published so I can now share my entire story with you.

Prologue

...win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people.

—President Lyndon Johnson

FINALLY, I WAS leaving Vietnam. The war could go on without me.

A stewardess with that Bridget Bardot pout posed on top of the portable platform positioned next to the plane's open door. My heart beat double time when I reached the top of the stairs, her blue cap askew just enough to make her look even more like Bardot. I paused for a moment while I inhaled her perfume, Tabu. "Welcome to Pan American Airlines," she said then turned to the Marine behind me.

In just a few hours—after being gone 405 days—I would meet my six-month old son for the first time, feel his chubby cheeks, brush his hair, then hug my wife and six-year-old daughter.

I sat on the left side of the Boeing 707, nervous a Viet Cong soldier would mortar the runway in broad daylight. Fifteen May 1967. We taxied south down the runway and turned around to head back toward the Bay of Danang. Our plane sped past Quonset huts that lined the runway until the plane's nose tilted up and a burst of acceleration thrust me back into my seat.

As we dipped to the left and turned to head northwest I saw cars and motorbikes driving on Highway 1. Then I saw Hoa My (whah me) Elementary School, the school I went to twice a week as my squadron's Civic Action Officer to "win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people"—a phrase President Lyndon

Johnson borrowed from John Adams or maybe William Shakespeare and used many times. In truth, the Vietnamese people captured my heart and mind.

The previous day I taught my final English Language class at that school and said goodbye to the faculty and students, many of whom had grown to be my friends, especially Miss Xuan (*Soon*), one of the seven teachers in my class.

I saw her for the first time on 4 May 1966, the day I arrived “in-country.” She stood on the playground of Hoa My School wearing the traditional dress of Vietnam, an *ao dai*, (ow yai) white and tight to her slender body. Her hair, short and black as crow’s feathers, curled around her face accenting a smile that had its own language.

Miss Xuan took to her English lessons, continually repeating, mispronouncing, correcting, testing. Wanting more. She never missed a lesson...except the day before I left Vietnam. It seemed so out of character.

On that last class I had brought in her final assignment to return, an essay on King Quang Trung written in almost perfect English. But no Miss Xuan. I asked Mr. Hoan, one of my other close friends, if he knew why she was absent.

“Miss Xuan cannot be here today,” is all he said. He was a man of few words but open to learn and took his English lessons seriously.

I kept her paper, thinking I’d drop it off at the school on my way to the airport. But that didn’t happen. I could only guess at her reasons for missing that final class.

Maybe she was Viet Cong. The other two officers in our outfit who helped me teach the English Language classes suspected as much. If she was Viet Cong the South Vietnamese Government would arrest her and put her in prison. A death sentence for sure. Whatever the reason, I had a bad feeling.

It would take thirty-four years and three trips back to Vietnam to find the answer.

ONE

The Road to Vietnam

Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be.
—*Hamlet, Act 4, Scene 5, William Shakespeare*

Vallejo

IN THE TENTH grade, on my walk home after track practice, a black '55 Chevy slowed down beside me with three older guys in it, two of them, one in the front seat, one in the back, held their arm out the window and stared at me. Cigarettes hung out of their mouths and flopped up and down when they growled. This could be bad, I thought, so I looked straight ahead and kept walking but the two started howling and slapping the side of their Chevy trying to get my attention.

Finally, they pulled over to the curb ahead of me, parked the car, and walked over to the sidewalk, slow, like they had nowhere to go but right there ten yards in front of me. They just stood there, blocking the sidewalk with their six-foot frames, cigarettes dangling from their mouths, and identical DA haircuts greased down with a curl combed into the center of their forehead. Their T shirts had cigarette packs rolled up into the shirt sleeves. These guys were big, probably seniors from Floyd Terrace. I should have crossed the street or turned around, but for some reason, I just kept walking even though I knew at that moment I could get my teeth knocked out.

Then the bigger of the three took a drag off his cigarette, pulled it out of his mouth and pointed at me, “Hey, that’s Bob Biggs’s brother, not a good idea to mess with him.” They gave me a sneer, nodded their heads, got back in their Chevy and drove off.

This was Vallejo, California, a small town located at the north-eastern edge of San Francisco Bay. A town with a Navy base that employed many of its citizens. Also, a town known for its tough neighborhoods, where growing up you were either an athlete, a car club member, or a fighter. My brother, six years older, was all three. I was a two-sport athlete—football and track.

My brother, tall and thin with bicep muscles that bulged out of his white T shirt, had a reputation in Vallejo for being tough; that is, winning every fight he fought, some he started, most he didn’t. That reputation passed down to me. I played football for Vallejo High, the only high school in town and a team that won the North Bay League Football Championship each of the previous four years.

My first encounter with Assistant Football Coach Dick Biami set the stage. Coach Biami was short, five-foot-six or seven, but no one would ever mess with him. He was a boxer in the Marines and never lost a fight.

Coach Biami wanted to know if I was as tough as my brother. “Yes,” I lied.

Then he related a story to me. He told me my brother came into the coach’s office after practice one day and showed him his index finger. A bone stuck out just below his fingernail with blood oozing around the bone turning his finger and fingernail red.

“I got stepped on in practice, Coach.”

Coach Biami asked him if it hurt and my brother said, “Not much.”

Then he told my brother to put his finger flat on the counter so he could look at it. But instead of looking at the finger, he took a padlock, locked it, wrapped his fingers around the ring, raised it up and swung it down hard on the counter right next to my brother’s finger.

Coach Biami looked at me and chuckled, “He didn’t flinch or move that finger one iota. Are you that tough?”

“Yes.” I lied again.

* * * *

High school had three of my favorite things: football, girls, and Drama. Suzie Schmutz was in my Drama class. She was also a cheerleader for the football team and the most popular girl in school with a big smile and beautiful blue eyes. Maybe I could finagle a date with her.

Tryouts for the Fall play, *I Remember Mama*, came up in November so I tried out. “Hey Brian, you got the part of Uncle Chris,” Russ Obee said. Russ Obee was our quarterback on the football team and also in Drama.

“Who’s that?” I said.

“He’s the lead.”

The lead in the school play, how cool was that? I also dated Suzie Schmutz. Took her to a movie, *The Vikings*. It was my third time but she had never seen it. I took my dad’s new two-tone ’59 Ford Fairlane, orange and white. Only 259 miles on it.

After the movie I parked in front of her house and we talked. “You’re a good football player,” she said.

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

“You want to go out again?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Maybe another movie.”

“That would be okay.”

I kissed her. Not long. But long enough. I smiled all the way home driving my dad’s new Ford.

One night at a rehearsal of *I Remember Mama*, after I finished a scene with Mama, Miss Dutton, our Drama teacher, said, “Uncle Chris, could you sing some sort of ballad at the end of

that scene? You're a little tipsy from the drink so you can slur it a bit. Just some tune, you can even make it up."

I said, "How 'bout the theme from *The Vikings*, this guy's Norwegian isn't he?"

"Try it."

"De DAAAAW da, De DAAAAAW da, de daaw, de daaw, de daaw, de daaw, de DAAAAAAW!" I bellowed.

"Great, Brian. Keep it."

Suzie Schmutz stage managed the play, which gave me time to get to know her.

At breaks we talked about high school and college. She wanted to major in Drama at some college. She had her life planned out. College, New York City, an acting career. That's why she wanted to stage manage the play. She wanted to learn all facets of the theater, backstage work, makeup, acting, set construction.

Suzie and I dated most of our senior year. One night after a date I drove my dad's new Ford just outside of town and parked in a clump of eucalyptus trees on American Canyon Road. We talked in the pitch-black dark about pimples, our brothers, and how we might be in college together majoring in Drama. I put my arm around her shoulders. Then we started making out. After a bit, I tried to undo her bra but just then a car drove up behind us. We sat there, frozen, until we heard a *clack, clack, clack* knocking noise on Suzie's window. She screamed, I jumped back.

"Roll down the window please, Highway Patrol." Suzie rolled down her window.

"Everything okay in there?" he said with a flashlight shining in our eyes.

"Yes, sir," I said.

"May I see your driver's license?"

"Yes, sir."

"You okay, Miss?"

“Yes, sir,” Suzie said.

After he looked at my license, he handed it to Suzie and said, “You better move on now.”

I took her home and walked her to the door where we stared at each other. I said “Goodbye,” too scared to kiss her, then drove down Tuolumne Street to Tennessee Street, and as I turned left onto Tennessee I forgot to signal and didn’t see the oncoming Ford pickup and crashed head-on into its front end. The police came with flashing red lights that lit up the intersection like a July 4th fireworks show. Some of my friends drove by and stared, some yelled out while I had to stand there. Luckily neither of us were going very fast so there wasn’t too much damage, not much at all on the pickup but my dad’s new Ford had to be towed down to the Wilson Russel Ford Dealership.

My dad was great about it. Didn’t even take my driving privileges away. That came later in the spring, after my second wreck with his ’59 Ford.

After graduation, Suzie went to UCLA, majored in Drama, graduated, and moved to New York City. I went to Vallejo Junior College to play football. It was seven years before I saw Suzie Schmutz again. That was in New York on my way back to Camp Lejeune from Naval Justice School in Rhode Island, one day before I received orders to Vietnam.

The University of Washington (UW)

After graduating from Vallejo Junior College (now Solano College) I received a football scholarship to the University of Washington. Bill Siler, one of our quarterbacks on the team, was 5' 9" and 172 pounds. He was a tough little guy at quarterback and a tough little guy off the field. Both being from California, he was from L.A., we quickly became friends. At one time, he’d been a “water-boy” for the UCLA football teams coached by Red Sanders.

The Washington football team lived in the Husky Crew House during the fall. And during winter and spring quarters the Husky Crew took over the facilities. This meant we needed to find other accommodations

Siler, nicknamed “Froggy” because he had a face like a frog, wanted me to move in to the Sigma Alpha Epsilon (SAE) fraternity house with him. We both needed a place to live that provided meals and Charlie Bond was already an SAE. Charlie Bond, a tackle on the Husky Football team, was 6' 4" and 245 pounds, a big guy with a big smile. Charlie and I became fast friends since his family lived in Puyallup and owned the largest blueberry farm west of the Mississippi. Also, his mother cooked a “to die for” blueberry pancake breakfast and a prize-winning blueberry pie whose warm crust would dissolve across my tongue and send the sweet and slightly salty flavor throughout my entire body. One heated piece, with vanilla ice cream, was never enough.

Fraternities, I found out, fostered one thing: drinking. Before weekend parties we would have a pre-party somewhere with a keg of beer. At the party itself, we would drink more beer, and at the post-party we would again, drink more beer. I weighed 160 pounds, even though the football program listed me as 170, and I assumed the beer would add some weight. It didn't.

After football season we drank beer at the Rainbow Tavern on 45th. Husky football players had the back room, an alcove large enough for six or eight of us. After we emptied a pitcher of beer, it was three hard slaps on the table by each one of us, *BANG*, *BANG*, *BANG*, and then we yelled, “MORE BEER!” as loudly as we could. The other patrons in the tavern sometimes clapped and sometimes yelled obscenities, depending on our level of obnoxious behavior.

One early January evening the assembled crowd included Bill Siler; Johnny O'Brien (O.B.), a guard; Dave Kopay, later a running back for the 49'ers and the first professional football player

to come out as gay; Charlie Bond; and me. After we finished our third pitcher of beer and did our “More Beer” chant, Siler, impatient because the next pitcher hadn’t arrived, bit off the top half of his empty glass.

I winced at the thought of the damage to his teeth or lips or gums. O.B. tried it and spit out little pieces of glass onto the table.

Siler said, “Come on Weasel try it.” (“Weasel” was my nickname since my back stretched out like a weasel when I ran.)

“No, I’ll pass.” I was fairly drunk and didn’t want my teeth any more damaged than they already were. In Junior High during a pickup football game in the park, I fell onto the sidewalk mouth-first after being tackled and the collision onto concrete left me with a chipped upper front tooth. When my mom saw me, she screamed “Brian, Brian, what happened?! Your tooth is chipped! You know that’s a permanent tooth. A permanent tooth!” She shook me by the shoulders yelling, “It won’t grow back! It won’t grow back!!”

After our waitress brought Siler his beer, I realized I was too drunk to have any more and did not want to find myself biting off the top of a beer glasses, so I decided to leave the group. Kopay asked for a ride to his BETA fraternity just down the street from the SAE House so Dave and I left in my black, ’56 convertible V.W. Beetle. While going up the hill on 47th I figured, in my drunken state, that I could run the stop sign on 16th even though it was a blind corner. I didn’t stop.

Luckily, no cars came, but it was the most stupid thing I had done in my entire life. My little V.W. Bug would have been crushed and both Kopay and I would have been seriously hurt or killed. I turned right onto 17th and stopped to let Kopay off at the Beta house, then drove down to the SAE house and parked in back.

When I wobbled down the hall to the sleeping porch another SAE, Tom, I think his name was, said, “Brian you’re ‘shitfaced.’”

“Yeah,” I said and zig-zagged down the hall.

“Whoa, there big boy.” He was a chubby 5' 5". “You’re really blasted, you need some coffee.”

“No, I’m just going to bed.”

“No, really buddy, you need some coffee.”

“Okay.”

He drove me to the Hasty Tasty. I’d never been there but we parked and went inside. As I walked in I happened to stumble into someone sitting at the bar.

“Hey, shithead. Watch what you’re doing.”

I’m not sure what I said if anything.

“You want to take this outside?” he said.

I remember saying, “Sure.”

We walked back to the front door and out to the parking lot with a clamoring crowd following. I stood in front of this tall guy who looked like Clark Kent and said, “I’m going to take off my watch,” which I did, and then I used both hands to put the watch in my pocket. And at this point, Clark Kent hit me right in the mouth. I went out, unconscious.

I woke up lying on the pavement with some woman holding my head and yelling. She gave me a hanky or cloth to wipe the blood from my mouth and then “SAE Tom” came over to help me up. Off we went to his car with blood spilling out of my mouth. Back at the SAE House I realized I did not have my four upper front teeth. I was drunk but I knew that was not good.

It took time to heal, but fortunately the football team dentist built a partial denture and I was normal within a month. And no more chipped tooth.

* * * *

After football season I tried out for one of the Theatre Department’s winter plays, *The Trickeries of Scapino* by Molière. I got the part of Silvestro, Scapino’s sidekick who assists in many of his “trickeries.”

My partial denture was ready about halfway through our rehearsal period of *Scapino*. This was fortunate since one cannot say words beginning with Vs or Fs without upper front teeth. However, in the scene where Scapino asks my character, Sylvestro, to scare the bejesus out of the rich Argante, Vanick Galstaun, our director, thought it would add a menacing flavor and some extra humor if I came on stage without any upper front teeth. It worked, I also added a black eye patch.

My next theater experience, included the part of Barnadine in Shakespeare's *Measure For Measure*, directed by Duncan Ross and staged in the Showboat Theatre moored below the UW campus on Lake Union. The Showboat designed by John Ashby Conway and built by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) opened in September 1938. Some of the actors that played on the Showboat stage included Lillian Gish, Robert Culp, and Chet Huntley, who later switched from acting to broadcasting the evening news with David Brinkley.

Duncan Ross wanted me to have a full beard as Barnadine which I enjoyed growing. And, of course, no front teeth would be perfect for this prisoner, so I removed my partial plate for that role also.

Seattle Times Theatre Critic Tom Robbins wrote in his review of *Measure for Measure*:

If Brian Biggs would growl like a Tasmanian devil instead of bellowing like a bison, he would succeed in an otherwise perfect characterization of the most interesting figure in the play: Barnadine, a drunken condemned criminal, a symbol of those who took the savageries of Elizabethan justice for granted and went unconcernedly, or with crude jest, to the ax.

Journalist George Burley had this to say:

Brian Biggs, portraying the “independent” prisoner, Barnadine, deserves an “o-le” as probably the play’s best comic

actor—by doing almost nothing. It is rather unfortunate that his stage time is so short.

We toured the show all over the state of Washington during Spring Break, then returned to the Showboat for three more shows on April 4-6. On Friday, April 5, 1963, Coach Owens called a meeting of the football team to prepare for our spring practice. At the end of the meeting we lined up to collect our playbooks at the front table. When I reached for my book, Coach Owens said, “Biggs, you better get rid of that beard and get rid of it quick.”

“Yes, sir,” I said. “It’s for the Shakespeare play I’m in and it ends tomorrow night. It will be gone right after the play.”

“See to it.”

In 1963 there were very few beards on the University of Washington campus and I can’t remember any shoulder length hair on the men. But change was a’comin.

* * * *

Siler and I went to the Montlake Tavern the Friday before Spring Break. School was done and we wanted to celebrate. Charlie Bond, who was now my roommate in an apartment, had gone home to Puyallup. It wasn’t crowded so we sat at the bar and ordered our beer. The man next to Siler said to the bartender, “The Huskies sure had a shitty season last year,” not realizing we both played on the team. Siler could snap pretty quick when taunted into an argument or disagreement. He turned to the man not much older than us and asked where he was from. He said Seattle and Siler jumped off his stool, shoved the guy’s shoulder hard enough to knock his beer all over the bar, and yelled, “You wanna see what a Husky football player can do?”

He reared back to throw a punch and I grabbed his arm, “Come on Froggy, let’s get out of here.” The guy stood up and towered over Siler, saying, “You want to lose some teeth, shit bird?”

That did not deter Siler from the fight he was anticipating but by that time, the bartender had come around to help me escort Siler out of the tavern.

“I don’t give a shit how tall your are, ass hole,” Siler yelled as he fought to free himself from my hold as I wrestled him out the front door. “You’re the shit bird!”

Once outside I escorted Siler to his car and made sure he got in and then walked around to the passenger side. “Shit bird,” he yelled again and again as he took out his keys, started the car, and took off with the gas pedal down to the floorboard and slammed into a telephone pole.

No seat belts back then, so I hit the dashboard mouth-first and broke my partial plate. The teeth weren’t damaged, they just snapped off the plate.

Our bus for the theater tour was scheduled to load at 2:00 p.m. the next day and then head down Highway 99 to Olympia for our first showing of *Measure For Measure* on our state tour.

Our team dentist came in to the office on that Saturday just to glue my front upper teeth back on to the plate. My character didn’t need his teeth but I didn’t want to spend all our free time without upper front teeth. I had a crush on Bridget Hanley, who played Marianna in the show, and missing my upper front teeth changed the way I talked besides looking weird.

* * * *

During my senior year, the fall of 1963, my third year at Washington, I made second team, enjoyed some playing time, and proved myself to the coaches. Then, in a Monday evening shop class for the Theatre Department, we worked on the set of *The Fantasticks*. Marcie, a woman I had dated twice and someone I would have liked to continue dating, started cleaning up just before the 10:00 p.m. quitting time. I needed to make one more cut on the table saw but wanted to walk Marcie back to her sorority. It was

an easy cut, taking a quarter-inch off a six-foot piece of molding, and I rushed to do it before she left the shop. I adjusted the blade's height, measured out the width of the cut, lay the molding on the table, turned on the saw, and began to push the wood through, putting slight pressure on the molding so it would slide against the fence. However, I didn't pick up a push stick to use for such a close cut, too interested in Marcie since she had finished her sweeping job. When I moved the molding near the rotating blade, *WHACK! WHACK! WHACK!* All the fingers on my right hand were sucked into the whirling razor-sharp points while the molding flapped up and down and blood splattered all over the saw and me.

Marcie screamed and other students ran to the see what happened, but Tyke Lounsbury, the instructor, calmly brought out a clean towel and wrapped it around my hand and then organized a team of two students to take me to the Hull Health Center. Marcie left the shop at the same time I did but we went our separate ways.

The nurses at the Health Center said they couldn't handle something that serious so they sent the two students and me to the University Hospital. Those nurses cleaned and wrapped the wounds on all five digits then knocked me out with a pain killer.

The next morning, Dr. Blue operated on my hand and left me with sixty-three stitches, a hard cast from the tips of my fingers to my elbow, and some more pain pills. When he came in to see me later that day, he said, "Brian, you are a very lucky man. You won't lose any fingers."

"Good," I said, "I have a game against Stanford this week."

"A game?"

"Yes, I'm on the Husky football team."

"Brian, you won't be playing any more football, not this season at least."

He was wrong on that point. I was getting some playing time, bumped up to second team, and at this point in the season I was playing my best football as we prepared for Stanford at Stanford.

I sent tickets to my Vallejo buddies and my mom and dad. I was sure we would beat Stanford on Saturday, October 19th, and I might score touchdown.

But that Monday night, October 14th, my right hand got sucked into that table saw blade and I missed the Stanford game. And it looked like I would miss other games. My fingers took a long time to heal, but once the cast came off I started going to practices and running with the team. I still couldn't catch the football or scrimmage.

Eventually, I could endure a full practice again with a wrap around the two middle fingers as they had the deepest cuts. The season came down to a must win at Washington State in Pullman on November 23rd to go to the Rose Bowl. My two fingers were still tender but I didn't tell any of the coaches. I wanted to play in that Washington State game and I was ready.

However, the assassination of President Kennedy on Friday, November 22nd delayed most college football games that weekend. The Kennedy tragedy gave me two additional weeks of practice and I was fully recovered for the Washington State game on December 7th. We beat them 16 to 0 and were on our way to play Illinois in the Rose Bowl!

The Rose Bowl was a special time for all of us—a trip to Disneyland, dinner at Lawry's Prime Rib Restaurant, reporters asking questions and a luxury hotel. There was an article on me by Dave Beronio, the Sports Editor for the *Vallejo Times Herald* and an article written in the *Seattle Times* about my conquest at Lawry's Prime Rib Restaurant:

Regarding those dinners, Brian Biggs, a 170-pound back, is the champion eater on the Washington squad. He consumed three large servings of meat, potatoes and vegetables. That was in addition to bread, salad, milk and dessert. As one teammate described Biggs' efforts: "He destroys everything in sight."

We lost the Rose Bowl game 17 to 7, to Dick Butkus and crowd. At our year-end banquet Charlie Bond received the Flaherty Inspirational Award, Dave Kopay was a co-captain along with John Stuphey, and I received the Most Inspirational Player award for a non-letterman, an award honoring Brian Stapp who died in a diving accident at the beginning of his junior year. Coach Owens, however, gave me a letter so I could join the Big W Club. It was an honor for me to receive the Stapp award at our banquet, although I couldn't go up to receive it, nor did I get my picture in the *Seattle Times* with Charlie Bond and the other players honored as I was staring in another play at the Showboat Theatre that night and needed to leave the banquet early. My father accepted the award for me.

That spring I graduated with a degree in Drama and planned to go to Hollywood to find work as an actor. A friend of my brother's, Joe D'Agusta, was casting director for Paramount and had TV shows like *Mission Impossible*, *Star Trek*, and *Rawhide*. I figured he could help me find an agent and hook me up with the right people.

But two days after graduation I received a letter that opened with, "Greetings: You are hereby ordered for induction into the Armed Forces of the United States."

Drafted into the Army! But that news did not alter my plans for Hollywood. I was twenty-two years old and in excellent shape. My father was a Marine and my older brother was a paratrooper in the Army. Hollywood could wait.

However, since I had a college degree, it made no sense for me to be a private in the Army, so I signed up to attend the Marine Corps Officer Candidate School in Quantico, Virginia.

On 11 December 1964, after ten weeks of leg lifts, pushups, pullups, and wind sprints, plus forced marches with sixty-pound backpacks, crawling in mud under a barbed wire screen, pugil-stick fights, and mental harassment from our Drill Instructors,

none of which bothered me, nor most of my fellow Officer Candidates, I stood at attention in Quantico, Virginia, as a Marine Second Lieutenant.

On that date, I had never heard of Vietnam.

TBS: The Basic School

Our Marine Corps Basic School Class, 4-65, billeted (lived) in O' Bannon Hall. Two weeks into the six-month TBS program, my roommate George Boccock, gave me a note that was taped onto our door: "Report to Captain Hancock, ASAP."

With note in hand and field jacket collar up, my shined black boots crunched across the green and white snow specked lawn that sloped a hundred yards down to Heywood Hall, TBS Headquarters building.

Once inside Heywood Hall, I walked halfway down the hall to a woman with short hair, red finger nails, and a sweater over her shoulders who sat at her desk typing, her red-tipped fingers in constant motion like keys on a player piano.

She did not look up. Just stared at the typewriter paper.

I knocked on the counter. Nothing. "Excuse me," I said.

She looked up with a start. "Oh, I'm sorry, Lieutenant. What can I do for you?"

"Can you tell me where the ASAP office is, Ma'am?"

Her eyebrows wrinkled in to each other, almost touching. "I beg your pardon."

"I need to report to the ASAP office."

She pushed her chair back and looked into an adjoining office. Then back at me for a moment. She rose from her chair and walked to the doorway. There was a sign above the adjoining office door that read, "Commanding Officer." My heart raced. This was Colonel Platt's office, the Commanding Officer (CO) of Basic School.

"Now, Lieutenant, what is it exactly you're looking for?"

“I’ve got this note here that says to report to Captain Hancock at the ASAP office.”

She walked to me, “May I see the note?”

“Yes.”

“Lieutenant, the note says for you to report to Captain Hancock, A-S-A-P.” She pronounced each letter individually like I hadn’t learned the alphabet. Then she continued, “A.S.A.P.—As Soon As Possible?”

I looked at her, back at the note, and then over to Colonel Platt’s door. “ASAP. Really. I’ve never heard that.”

“Captain Hancock’s office is just down that hallway, Lieutenant, she said.”

“Yes, I know where it is. Thank you. I’m on my way.” In the hall I muttered, “ASAP.”

I knocked on Captain Hancock’s door. “Lieutenant Biggs requests permission to enter, sir.”

“Come in Lieutenant Biggs.” Captain Hancock rose from his chair and looked at me. His olive drab utility uniform, starched as always, seemed extra crisp like he’d just put it on. And his belt buckle, Brassoed to a mirror-like sheen, seemed fake, way too bright for a belt buckle.

Captain Hancock was quiet for a moment and then said, “Have a seat Lieutenant Biggs.” I sat down in front of his desk and he sat back down. It was a small office with no windows. The Captain had some plaques on the wall but I couldn’t read them. His file cabinet sat in a corner. He was a career Marine.

“Your mother called headquarters a while ago. She wanted you to know your grandmother passed away yesterday morning. In her sleep.”

That was news I hadn’t expected. Captain Hancock was silent. I was silent. My grandmother had moved to Portland, Oregon, after my grandfather died. She lived with my uncle. I saw her during the Christmas break on my way up to Seattle to see Char-

lie Bond. She had a strong influence on my life, reading to me when I was younger, picking flowers and vegetables out of her garden.

She came from Scotland and spoke with a Scottish brogue. She often stayed weekends with us in Vallejo and when I introduced her to my teenage friends, she would stick out her firm hand and say, “Howjadoo.” They’d crack up when she left the room. I laughed sometimes, but “howjadoo” sounded normal to me.

“Should I call my mom?” I said.

Captain Hancock said, “Your mother wants you to call her. Wants to let you know about the funeral.”

He walked out of the office to let me use his phone. I called my mom collect and after I talked to her, decided not to go to the funeral. It was going to be a small service and my mom didn’t think it would be important for me to attend.

Captain Hancock was in the hall when I left the office. “I’m sorry to hear about your grandmother, Lieutenant Biggs. If you need leave time, come and see me.”

“Thank you, sir. Thanks for letting me use your phone. I won’t need any leave, sir.”

I nodded to the woman outside Colonel Platt’s office. She looked at me and nodded back with that wrinkled up forehead. She must have thought, *How is he ever going to make it through Basic School?*

The lawn was all white now and large snowflakes filled the air. My middle name, Murray, is my grandmother’s maiden name. All the officers at TBS were in the process of turning information in for our calling cards. It was a big deal to have a card we could hand out to friends or a business. I hadn’t decided how to have my name printed. “Brian Biggs” was my first choice. I liked the simplicity. I was not going to use “B.M. Biggs.” On that walk across the snow toward O’ Bannon Hall, “Brian M. Biggs” popped into my head.