

# CADILLAC PLATOON

**A Vietnam War Novel**

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Hellgate Press



Ashland, Oregon

## CADILLAC PLATOON

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*To my father for his help and encouragement;  
to my son, Seth, for his persistence;  
to Paul, my boyhood friend, for a thumbs up;  
and to Jane for her endless patience.*



**PART I**  
**THE SOJOURN**



# CHAPTER 1

July 1968

HANK KIRBY SHIVERED. A brisk, chill wind cut through his summer khakis and threatened to capture his dark green, overseas cap. A forbidding California fog swirled about him, illuminated in the night by soft blue lights on the runway beyond the waiting Boeing 707.

He and the others had been herded here on the tarmac moments ago. It should have been a straight shot from terminal to plane, but this was the Army, and it required at least one hurry-up-and-wait. He milled around with the other men, glancing over at the plane ever so often. He could feel it staring back at him, its cockpit eyes colder than the wind.

He shivered again with a feeling of uneasy anticipation.

“OK, you guys move out!” barked a major acting like a sergeant. A single line came together and plodded forward.

“Wait! Hold up again,” the major shouted, and like a concertina, they bunched up before regaining their distance, and played another chorus of hurry-up-and-wait.

Finally, they were moving again; this time for real as Hank hurried up the step ramp, a part of the procession, knowing he was amid disciplined lemmings, their demise the plane’s entryway.

It was not long before they were quietly seated, listening to a stewardess monotonous safety procedures as she fashioned the latest in life jacket apparel. A sign flashed on: “Fasten your seat belts. No smoking.”

Hank braced himself.

The huge aircraft taxied to the runway, turned slowly ninety degrees, and stopped. Revving jets whistled to a fever pitch, obliterating all other sounds, disturbing personal thoughts, and then with a sudden lurch the plane accelerated down the tarmac. It angled up and headed into a black void.

From window seat 26A, Hank observed over the heads of his fellow passengers the stewardesses going about their duties. A sandwich snack was hurriedly distributed. Sleep then spread throughout the plane.

After a while, one small reading light came on and kept Hank's section from darkness. His buddy, Dick Kistler, was deeply engrossed in examining the new issue of *Playboy*.

He almost nudged him to turn the light off. But didn't. It wasn't the light that bothered him. It was the silence. Catalytically, it surfaced his thoughts.

Once again, his mind turned to Pam and the moments in time they had been together. He turned to those moments often, choosing different ones to evoke different feelings, like turning to favorite poems in a favorite book of poetry. It was time now to read the first poem again. And later, for he knew he had plenty of time on this flight, he would read the last poem.

He had planned to go home that fall weekend of his senior year at the University of Florida, but he hadn't. No reason to. His home had gone. Three days before, his parents had separated and were planning to divorce. It wasn't too shocking, as he had suspected it for some time. Still, it didn't sit well; so he had decided to stay in Gainesville for the weekend and brood privately by himself.

And so he found himself guzzling Rebel Yell from a soggy Dixie cup, leaning in a corner alone, and observing his frantic fraternity brothers and their dates wildly dancing in celebration of the afternoon's football victory. He didn't really like where he was, but had no place else to go. After all, this house was where he lived, and being near the partying gave him the excuse he wanted to drink his bourbon and get plastered.

The rock band blared on. Amplified guitars stung his ears. Then the band suddenly stopped. Dave Watson entered. Last year's All SEC; and this year's potential All American fullback, Watson was a key provider of the day's victory. A rousing cheer went up, followed by eager clapping and clinched fists slugging the air. It was a great honor of the house to have Dave stop by like a visiting head of state.



His private corner offering him the anonymity he wanted, Hank eschewed participation in the hero worship. Instead his eyes fixed on the girl whose arm wrapped with Dave's. She was quite lovely, about five-six, with delicate features and the long, flowing brownish-blond hair of a surfer girl. The body of one too. She wore a light, salmon-colored sweater and blue jeans that hugged a shapely buttocks and long legs. Her hair was fresh and clean like fine silk, parted in the middle, and framed a face of defined cheek bones, blue-gray eyes, and spontaneous smile with deep-set dimples.

Hank poured more bourbon. His usual shyness ebbed. Finally, he looked around the room. She stood alone, waiting for Dave's return from a pit stop.

He made his move, plowed through a flood of gyrating bodies, and looked down on blue-gray eyes. They held a mischievous twinkle. And more... He could lose himself in those eyes.

"Would... would you like to dance?" his voice cracked.

She glanced around for some sign of Dave, then looked up. "Sure."

Abruptly, the band stopped. There was an awkward moment as they stared at each other, the reason for their togetherness ending with the music. Then it started in again with "When a Man Loves a Woman." A slow one. They edged out into a mass of slowly swaying bodies. Her hand went into his; her body pressed in. His right arm went behind her, and he realized he still held his soggy Dixie cup. He held it away from her, feeling doltish, but recognizing he owed much thanks to this cup and its contents.

When he met Pam Sadler, he started his book of poetry.

Dick's light was still on.

Hank shifted his position and rearranged his small pillow between his seat and the window. He forced his head, neck bent and crooked, on the pillow. His eyes glanced at the window and he saw his reflection. A wistful smile stretched across his lips.

It had not been the Rebel Yell responsible for calling her the day after, though it had played a role in acquiring her phone number. And then, after subsequent phone calls and quickie meetings between classes and then weekend dates, he and Pam began enjoying one another. More so, they decided in the spring, than anyone else. Something special had magically clicked between them. He had defied all the basic laws of probability theory: he wasn't

a football hero, wasn't anything at all important on campus, only a serious civil engineering major specializing in sanitary engineering, with all the attendant ridicule from his fraternity brothers of wanting to make a living out of shit.

It was the spring, too, when she completely stopped dating Dave Watson, and when he met her parents and realized her father hated him as much as his fraternity brothers said Dave hated him. And the reason her father hated him, Pam said, was because her father liked football heroes like Dave Watson.

It was also the spring when he became concerned about the summer and their being apart, and about the fall when she would be starting her senior year, and so would Dave, and they still would be apart.

The Army had come between them, separating them. As a freshman in 1963, thanks to parental prodding, he had enrolled in ROTC. "Better to go in as an officer, then to be drafted as a private," Hank's memory quoted his father. "As an Army officer you'll learn leadership and responsibility that would take ten years to learn in a civilian job," was another one. His father's advice had sounded better in 1963 than it did now.

"Hey Hank, fasten your seat belt," Dick elbowed him while placing his *Playboy* in the seat pocket. "we're landing."

Hank momentarily put his thoughts aside. "Yeah. OK," he responded. He became aware of a jerking vibration as the wing flaps adjusted to slow their progress. "When we get airborne again, better lay off the magazine and get some sleep. It's not going to do any good getting horny where we're headed."

"Oh, yeah? I wouldn't be too sure of that," Dick quipped slyly.

Once on the ground Hank was anxious to take off again. He was exhausted and wanted sleep. He didn't disembark with the others to stretch the legs, work out kinks, and try to glimpse Hawaii from an air terminal. He waited where he was, searching for sleep, though afraid to find it and be awakened minutes later by the commotion of the returning.

Soon they were soaring again. The interior became enshrouded in darkness. Dick had followed his advice and turned out the light.

Hank slept fitfully, his rest marked with constant stirring and shifting and dreaming that he wasn't really on this flight. That he was only dreaming he was.

“Your breakfast, sir.”

He gave a startled jump. A honey-haired stewardess was addressing him. She leaned toward him and thrust a tray of sausage and scrambled eggs in front of his face. Hank took it and she strode back up the aisle.

Dick poked him with his elbow. “She must be infantry,” he commented.

“Why’s that?” Hank muttered as he tried to clear the cobwebs of a sleepy stupor while placing his breakfast on his tray table. He could see that others around him had been served sometime ago. Honey-hair had let him sleep.

“Her hips. Didn’t you see them? They said ‘follow me.’ That’s our motto, you know.”

Hank laughed. The sharp edge of tension momentarily dulled for the first time since the flight’s beginning. “Go ahead,” he urged. “All she has is a pair of hips. Evidently, you didn’t catch the rest.”

“Don’t want the rest. Just her ass,” Dick chortled. “Those swaying cheeks are two pistons in slow motion.”

Hank smiled and bit into a sausage patty.

Dick drained his coffee, picked up his dinner tray, and shoved it across the chest of the staff sergeant on his right and into the path of the passing stewardess. Already overburdened with discards, she stooped low and let him place it on top.

He put up his table and stretched his big, muscular legs. “Damn my ass aches,” he complained. “This sittin’ is killing it. How did I luck out with this damn middle seat? I bet I’ve got the biggest ass of anyone on board.” He waited for a reply from Hank. None coming, he said: “Stop worrying my friend. Things could be worse.”

“How do you know I’m worrying?” Hank asked through a mouthful of eggs.

“I’ve known you long enough to know.”

Hank nodded as he swallowed his last bite and then washed it down with orange juice. “A year ago this month, at Benning, seems long enough. And things could be worse, I guess,” Hank conceded. “It’s good we’re still together. After we wound up at Gordon, I’d thought that would be it.”

“We had some good times there, didn’t we?”

“Yeah. Kind of crowded in the apartment, though...rooming with the whoremaster of Augusta, who tried to screw anything in a skirt. Oh, as you were on that...not tried...*did*.”

While at Fort Gordon they had shared a two bedroom apartment in Augusta, Georgia. It was an old five-story fire trap, but had the hottest swing spot, the Pheasant Inn, in town in its basement. That was where Dick did much of his woman hunting or “beaver-trapping” as he called it.

“Well you should’ve joined me. Not my fault your girl was still in school. And not my fault you didn’t take advantage that she *was* still in school. Besides, you were too caught up in your battalion’s social affairs. Right, Edith?”

“Fuck you, Kistler. You know that shit bothered me.”

And it still did. His neck pricked as the unsavory episode momentarily clouded his mind. At one instant he’d been getting his ass chewed out by his heel-locking Battalion commander. The lieutenant colonel, an ex-mess sergeant before somehow getting a commission, had pulled one of his classic pop inspections of the company mess hall for which Hank, as mess officer, was responsible. The mess hall had failed; it was in shambles with greasy plates, dirty floor, and cold, weak coffee, sabotaged by two PFC cooks from Harlem who were having morale problems with their white, Alabama mess sergeant. The colonel, in a loud, clipped voice, had asked Hank what he was going to do about the mess in the mess hall. Hank couldn’t hold back. He told the colonel his solution: send the mess sergeant to OCS. The colonel had no appreciation of Hank’s dry wit and began screaming, his halitosis breath being more than sufficient punishment for Hank’s transgressions.

Then suddenly the screaming stopped, and none too soon, because Hank was about to retch. Then in the next breath the colonel became strangely conciliatory and reminded him of the monthly Battalion party, a boorish, sticky affair for which there was no excuse for being absent, except maybe death.

That night at the party, the colonel had greeted him with fulsome warmth, “Well, how is everything, Lieutenant Kirby? Hope you’re enjoying yourself.” Before he could get out a word, the colonel went on. “By the way, I have my sister-in-law visiting for the weekend and I know she would be delighted to dance with you. Oh, here she is now.” Half turning, and as if on cue, there, standing beside him, was the sister-in-law. “Oh Edith, I was just talking about you. Lieutenant Kirby here said that he didn’t know any girls here and would love to dance with someone. Would you care to accommodate him?”

So he had to maneuver some dame around the dance floor, who was twice his age, built like a steamroller, and just as hard to steer. Some sister, some law, yet that seemed typical of this man’s Army.

The following week he received a written reprimand from the colonel for his remark in the mess hall. The colonel had said his offense had bordered on insubordination and an Article 15, which was one step below a Summary Court Martial. But in light of his recent conciliatory behavior, he was only receiving the reprimand which would be a permanent record in his 201 File. His so-called “conciliatory behavior” Hank took to mean that Edith had enjoyed a favorable moment with him at the party, and had so informed the colonel.

“Maybe the reason we’re still together is that we’ve got the same career pattern.” Dick’s voice broke through the dark clouds in Hank’s head. “If a two-year obligation’s a career. The Army being so fucking alphabetical, Kirby followed by Kistler.”

“Let’s hope it stays that way,” Hank said, nodding in agreement, though knowing it wasn’t the real reason they were still together. And knowing Dick knew it too. He liked the fact they were together. He hated the reason.

The seed of the reason had started during their Fort Gordon duty. It had begun with an idea of Dick’s, and it was taken to a misjudged fruition—*this trip together*—because they had taken the idea to a plan and from there to implementation.

Dick had included Hank in this idea, this plan, because of their unique bond of friendship, born at Fort Benning, Georgia, the so-called home of the infantry, and their home at Infantry Officers Basic Course IOBC. This school for freshman lieutenants consisted of a strange conglomeration of civilian university ROTC gung-ho, give-a-shits, who didn’t get a regular commission and get into the more exclusive, RA (Regular Army) infantry course, and of the don’t give-a-shits from ROTC military schools such as VMI, The Citadel, Norwich, and Texas A& M who had decided at their particular institution they didn’t want to be RA with an additional year obligation, and hence were exiled to IOBC, or some other reserve officers combat arms school.

Dick’s classification was of the ROTC military school, don’t give-a-shit, VMI class of ’67. Hank was a “Gator,” University of Florida, class of ’67 and he was an anomaly—a Gator out of the swamp. He was *not* a gung ho, give-a-shit. There were other IOBC anomalies too, to be sure, but they were few and none more so than he who held a BS Degree in civil engineering, sanitary option. He knew he belonged in the Army’s Medical Service, where he could ensure that troops were supplied with safe drinking water having a high free chlorine residual, and that their slit trenches were well limed at the end of the day.

At the least he belonged in the Army's Corps of Engineers, or so he told his ROTC instructor. The same captain who had read him his reporting orders that spring of his senior year as he was sitting in the auditorium of the military science building. He had been staring out at the tall Washingtonian palms, oblivious to the fact that it was his name they were talking about, the one who had to report in July to the "Home of the Infantry." Later in the captain's office, after Hank had given his side, the captain had impatiently explained that the Army was often like a great big lottery in assigning individuals to slots and that was one reason, said the captain, that he was here at Florida, instructing fuck-heads like Hank, rather than at the Point with the "Cream of the Crop."

Dick was right, though, on one point. The Army *was* alphabetical. And that was the reason they *had* been together, starting that first day at IOBC when Kirby found himself next to Kistler in ranks in the quadrangle of the huge BOQ that reminded Hank of a big Gainesville dorm. The alphabet had been responsible for them rooming together, but it was a meshing of two different personalities like teeth into gears in a precision fit that had led to their unbreakable friendship.

Dick was liberal arts; Hank engineering. Dick was a ladies' man; Hank was a one-lady man. Dick was an extrovert; Hank an introvert. Dick was confident, about six-four, powerful build, and a leader.

Hank was a worrier, about six feet, lean and slight of build, and though not a follower, also not a leader, more of a stand-on-the-sidelines-and-watch-the-others-go-about-their-business type, observing their business, but aloofly not wanting to be part of it. But like magnets of opposite poles, they had attracted, and in Dick the gator had found a swamp.

Again, maybe the alphabet acted. After graduation from IOBC they both received orders to Fort Gordon. Hank had had another duty station in mind, though—Fort Sam Houston, home of the medical service. He had made formal application while at Benning for a branch transfer, giving the Army a second chance to right a wrong, to take full advantage of his specialized education, at one-third the pay if his engineering services were bid on the open job market. But requests in the Army take time, he knew, and so he had been content for the moment to remain with Dick and await his transfer.

With regard to their Fort Gordon duty assignments Dick was lucky; Hank

was unlucky. Dick was a rifle range instructor for the M-14 rifle, a rifle whose place in the Army was now limited to rifle ranges. Basic trainees were taught to fire a rifle where the only place it was being used was the rifle range where it was being taught. Dick rose early in the morning, and knocked off in early afternoon, calling it a week on Friday.

Hank was a training officer for a basic training company of raw recruits. He rose early, too, with Dick. And spent his day purportedly pushing troops, but in reality, spent it having his CO, Captain Filbert, watch him watch his master sergeant, Sergeant Lee, watch his drill instructors watch the trainees do calisthenics, airborne shuffle, eat breakfast, fire weapons, choke on tear gas, eat dinner, play the spirit of the bayonet with padded pugil sticks, and eat supper. And sometimes late at night his CO watched him watch Sergeant Lee watch the DIs watch the trainees crawl under barbed wire and live machine gun fire. They watched that one from a distance. They even did their watching every Saturday morning. And Saturday afternoon he had to watch his colonel, his CO, and other training officers of the Battalion fatuously roll dice for drinks at the Officers Club. And when Hank wasn't watching, he was doing his other duties: XO, mess officer, supply officer, and every other kind of company officer except CO, for he was the only other officer in the company.

In doing his training officer duties, he forgot everything he was supposed to learn at IOBC. To make amends for this shortcoming, the Army had recently sent him and Dick and a contingent of other infantry officers to a two-week refresher course in the jungles of the Canal Zone in Panama. There they learned the esoterics of jungle fighting: avoiding venomous snakes, making a hammock sleeping shelter, getting sniped at by some spec-four with a BB gun, eating monkey meat, or, in Hank's case, not eating.

But the real reason they were together now, elbow-to-elbow, on this 707, had begun one night in their apartment in Augusta. Dick's idea had been the reason, and later, because of it, Hank sadly learned that Dick was sometimes unlucky too.

It began at the zenith of Hank's so far dismal Army career, as he and Dick celebrated the glorious victory of the day. It had all started when the colonel selected Hank's company of basic trainees to represent the Battalion in the annual, single elimination flag football tournament. The selection was made by the roll of the dice at the Saturday afternoon mandatory social hour at

the Officers Club. On behalf of the company, Captain Filbert graciously accepted this honor to win one for the colonel and the everlasting glory of the 1st Brigade, 2nd Battalion, Basic Training Charlie Company, and he promptly turned to Hank, raised his mug of beer, and appointed Hank to the position of head coach.

For a training company to win just one game was considered a tremendous accomplishment since the competition consisted of veteran units who fielded veteran teams, some having practiced and played together with no more player personnel changes than an established college team. With this experience factor the veteran teams were more like pro teams when up against a basic training team, which in comparison was more like a college team that prohibited athletic scholarships.

But Hank's team did win one. And they won two. And three, four, five. And as an afternoon prelude to the evening of celebration, they won six. And the championship of the entire Post. First time ever for a basic training company. And it was the first time the colonel had praised Hank for a job well done. And Hank had bathed in this praise, a proud peacock with colorful feathers spread for everyone to see. He wished Pam had been there to see him. He wished her dad had been there too, to see his success on the gridiron. Dave Watson couldn't have done better, maybe not even if he had played. For he was only one man and the game of football was not a one-man sport.

And that was the reason Hank didn't want to spread his feathers for very long. For he was only one man, and though he could perhaps consider himself the architect of victory, he wasn't the decisive factor, which had been a combination of things, such as Dick Kistler, an all-Southern Conference linebacker at VMI, who had been the assistant coach and had devised the plays and the drills necessary to execute the plays. And such as having a quarterback who had been a small college All American and who was on the abbreviated, six-month National Guard program to avoid the draft and hence be able to play pro baseball with the Yankees' farm system. And such as having two PFC cooks from Harlem masquerading as basic trainees that didn't let their skirmishes with the bigoted mess sergeant interfere with their ability to run sub-ten hundred-yard dashes and catch passes with hands so sure they could've been soaking them in taffy during their cooking duties. And having big, mean farm boys who had decided that flag or no flag, no



one, especially some pansy spec-four, or buck sergeant, was going to get past them to interfere with their quarterback going long to one of the PFC cooks who had given them double servings of the mess sergeant's blueberry pie.

No, it had not been only Hank. He had admitted that fact to Dick over and over in inebriated slurs that evening of celebration in their apartment, as they sat slumped in threadbare armchairs, looking out over a darkened gravel, potholed parking lot and rusted iron fire escape, drinking one can after another of Black Label. Dick had not listened, though. He had been formulating in his head the ill-fated idea. The reason they were still together.

Dick had belched first and then announced how great life was and how much he enjoyed fucking. He spoke quietly to the parking lot and fire escape, his stocking feet propped up on the window sill. A brisk November wind stirred outside lending a sense of coziness to the moment. Hank leaned closer to catch his words. Dick then said he didn't want to go to *that* place. And it was time to do something about it. So far, they had five months in the Army, out of a twenty-four-month total active obligation. In another six months or so they would be going to *that* place unless they did something about it.

Hank considered reminding Dick that he was ahead of him, that he had applied for a branch transfer and if granted would increase his chances of not going to *that* place, or if he went to *that* place, he would be spending his time removing the shit rather than stepping in it if he stayed in infantry. But he decided not to remind Dick. Maybe Dick had something better.

Dick had belched again, pausing for effect; then began a flowing discourse of his idea. It was all very simple. He would merely use his connections at the Pentagon and have orders cut for the two of them for duty in Germany. That was not a bad duty station. They would like it and they would stay together.

Hank began to laugh, but held back. He had a strange feeling Dick was serious.

He was. He explained that his alma mater, VMI, had special status in the Army. More so really than West Point, though few people knew it and even fewer admitted it. And it was because of George C. Marshall, VMI class of '01, the "general's general," the top ranker in WW 2, Ike's boss and Mac's boss. It was his influence, Dick proclaimed, that was still prevalent in the Pentagon, though he had been dead for some time. And this influence and VMI's special camaraderie among fellow alumni—Brother Rats he called them—would allow Dick to call in the chits and get them both to Germany.

Hank had said nothing. He had many times listened to the beer talking for Dick. He had forgotten the conversation until a month later when Dick informed him he had an appointment at the Pentagon with General Druig, VMI class of '39. During their trip up there the following month in Dick's dilapidated Edsel, Hank had become a believer by listening to Dick's constant, infectious banter about how they were pulling it off.

Dick had talked to the general in private and was equally excited and positive on the trip back. Not even the engine block cracking at night outside of Florence, South Carolina, dampened his spirits. Nor when, after abandoning the Edsel along Highway 301, two girls had picked them up and led them on a motorized snipe hunt, dropping them off at midnight on a lonely country road, saying they were going to take them all the way to Augusta after checking in first with their parents, and never returning.

It was an extra day getting back, but they didn't care. Dick had pulled it off. Hank was even more elated and buoyant than Dick and gave his Mona Lisa smile to the colonel who chewed his fanny for reporting back to the Battalion a day late.

They remained floating in a fantasy world for a month. Hank had called Pam at Gainesville, telling her that he would be going to Germany. Would it be possible for her to go too?

At the end of the month their bubble popped, bayoneted by General Druig, VMI class of '39. In a letter to Dick, typed on official Pentagon stationery, the general admonished Dick for making a cowardly attempt to evade his duty to his country. VMI didn't pull strings to weasel out of *that* place. If there was string pulling to do, it was to *go* to *that* place. *that* place needed VMI men and VMI men needed to serve their country in the finest tradition in *that* place. Because of this, and because it was really best for Dick, he was personally seeing to it that Dick would surely go to *that* place. In fact, orders were now in the process of being cut which would assign Dick, after his Fort Gordon tour and two-week refresher course at Jungle School in Panama, to the First Infantry Division, the Big Red One, in *that* place. And by the way, the general had said, since they were fellow VMI men, and hence in the best tradition of the Brother Rat spirit, he was seeing to it that his friend, Lieutenant Kirby, would be going with him to the Big Red One. The general had used his influence; they would be together.

They were devastated. They were going to the Big Red One. They had certainly gotten a big one, all right—right up the ass.

A month later, Hank heard about his transfer request to the Medical Service. In light of his special education, it was being given favorable consideration, but they could not act at this time since orders were being cut for him to go to *that* place in his present MOS (Military Occupation Specialty) of 1542 (Infantry Platoon Leader). Upon his return from *that* place he could re-apply with excellent possibilities of getting his transfer.

But after *that* place it would be two years in the Army, and Hank would be out and available to the civilian world at full market value.

It was almost a month after hearing the status of his transfer that he and Dick got their orders. The last half of June would be Panama. A great many months beyond would be *that* place.

The talking had long since ended. Dick was back to his *Playboy*. He was now in the window seat, Hank in the middle, having switched seats after relieving their bladders.

Hank twisted uncomfortably. Army remembrances gave him an uneasy feeling. Enough of the bullshit, think the good thoughts, he commanded himself.

It was time to read the last poem, the best one. His happiest, saddest moment emerged before his eyes. The short hiatus between Panama and now.

His last night with Pam.

They finished their dinner at a steak house in Cocoa Beach, then a quick eighteen holes at a nearby Putt-Putt, followed by the movie, *The Graduate*. It was Hank's third time seeing it, catching it twice in Augusta, once with Dick, once by himself. This time his mind had not absorbed it. There was something else going on inside his head; the forecasted scenario that would follow the movie.

They drove in his '62 Ford Galaxy to a favorite parking spot, north of Canaveral Pier and up against the beach. There was privacy here.

Hank's car converted to his own secluded beach bungalow as his feet pushed the front seat all the way back. A quarter moon and bright, winking stars looked through the windshield. Surf rolled and crashed, its sound a special music.

They moved to the middle of the front seat and embraced. Then kissed. Their lips full and moist; their tongues taking turns searching and probing;

their eyes closed. And Hank trembled like never before, with nervous anticipation and excitement, realizing that this special night had finally come, their last night together for a year—their first making love, complete love.

It would have surprised Dick to know that Hank had not yet made love to Pam. Dick naturally assumed any couple going together over a week was shacking up. And after his periodic five-day leaves to Gainesville to see Pam in the interim of a new training cycle of raw recruits, Dick would always welcome him back to the apartment with a knowing smile and bemused side glances.

It would have surprised his fraternity brothers, too. They had had the same knowing smile and side glances when he would return to the house after an evening date with Pam. After all, they surely mused, wasn't she a former Dave Watson babe? Didn't girls have trouble keeping off their backs with Dave? Didn't Dave always confirm this trouble they had?

It surprised Hank as well. Because they loved each other. And for the same reason it would have surprised his fraternity brothers. After all, Pam *had* dated Dave for almost a year. It was this knowledge that had eaten at the insides of him like hydrofluoric acid for the one year and eight months he had known Pam. This knowledge and the fact that what Dave may have done, he had not. Though he had tried; though maybe not too assertively. Once her hands became barriers, he became obedient. Disappointed, frustrated, hurt, but still obedient. He would wait for her to want him.

Tonight she would want him.

Their kissing continued. Their bodies clamped tightly together, becoming one. Their passion moved them past previous limits, almost to completion... until she became rigid and started crying.

"What's wrong?" he asked in a voice wanting to sound soft and tender in an effort to hide his disappointment, hurt, and anger.

"Not this way, Hank. It's not the way I want it," she sobbed.

He pulled her hands down and aided by the quarter moon and starlight, looked into her eyes. They were frightened. "I love you," he said.

"I love you, too."

"Then why not?"

"Because it's not the way it should be, though I want it to be."

It made no sense to Hank. "Even though you love me and tomorrow I'm going away. For a year." He wanted to add "maybe a lifetime," the thought

of that possibility sticking in his throat. The possibility seemed too unreal, here in this car with the one he cared for more than anything else in the world.

She reached out and pulled him close. Her arms hugged and cuddled his head. Her cheek rubbed his. “When you come back, let’s don’t wait. Let’s get married right away. Maybe a month or two to plan things. Then let’s do it. How about an August wedding?”

He was stunned. Sure, they had discussed marriage before. Yet it was always in a nebulous, distant way. The Army and *that* place standing in the way, forcing their plans to be discussed conceptually, excluding any real details. Now, here was a detail, something real and tangible. It was a substitute for making love this evening, a special evening, but it was a worthy one. He would take it.

“Pam, will you marry me in August of 1969?” he asked formally.

“Yes, Hank. I’ll marry you in August of 1969.”

“Promise?”

She laughed. Her teary eyes smiled. “Yes. I promise.”

They began kissing again, more gently than before, with less passion.

Suddenly it occurred to him that Pam was a virgin. Somehow, she had avoided Dave Watson’s moves. And this knowledge made his frustrations palatable. And she had promised to marry him in August of next year.

“Hey, Hank, can you believe this?” Dick’s loud voice stirred him from his reflections. “They’re setting up a screen... looks like we’re gonna see a flick.” He pulled the shade across the portal to help darken the interior.

“Maybe it’s an Army training film,” Hank muttered indifferently.

“I’ll be...a Charlton Heston movie!” Dick said with excitement. “Hell, we must be booked on the wrong flight.”

“Doubt if we’d be that lucky.”

Quiet settled. Many for a brief moment forgot their destination and watched the movie. After an intermission for the stewardesses to serve food, the movie continued. It ended just before the pilot announced they would be landing shortly to refuel at Kadena Air Force Base, Okinawa, where they could stretch before they began their last leg.

The plane was once again airborne, on an almost westerly course. Inside, an apparent change had transformed the travelers back to their behavior at

the start of the journey. There was little talking or reading; some tried sleeping, most merely sat back and stared into space.

The plane glided above fluffy white clouds. The cloud cover broke into white patches and blue appeared below.

After a few hours, the blue disappeared, and dark splotches of land came underneath. The pilot's deep, resonant voice sliced the tense air. "We are now approximately twenty minutes outside Bien Hoa Air Base, Republic of Vietnam." Bits of nervous laughter rang out only to be swallowed by an awesome silence.

A clammy sweat filtered to the surface of Hank's palms as he fastened his seat belt.

The aircraft descended.

It banked left to make its final approach and dipped smoothly as the hot pavement seemed to rise up in welcome.

## CHAPTER 2

**S**TAGGERING SLIGHTLY, FRED Sadler negotiated the one step to his front door. His legs throbbed with a sharp arthritic pain. Twelve brutal hours of solid standing, sorting mail at the local post office had set his legs on fire. The overtime was hardly worth the money and agony; though it was worth the excuse it gave him to go to Bernie's Bar and Grill afterward to eat some supper, wind down, and shoot the shit with some of his cronies. Besides, a few brews would help ease his pain. He had tried to relieve more than a little pain. *He had closed the place down!* And now he suffered no pain except for the conflagration that still raged in the joints of his knees and ankles, which now had spread down to his toes and up to his groin. Thank God he had tomorrow off; getting up at 5:00 a.m. with only about three hours sleep would kill him.

He exhaled a long sigh of relief at finally being home, fumbled a little inserting the key, opened the door, and entered his three-bedroom, two-bath, Florida block home.

"Anybody awake?" He called out, surprised to see a light on.

"I am, Daddy. Mom's sleeping." Pam Sadler answered, the sound of her voice coming from the direction of the source of light.

He limped across the living room, stopping by the kitchen to get a little more pain reliever, a bottle of Pabst Blue Ribbon, and then headed for the small den. As he entered, he observed his only offspring curled up on a small sofa illuminated by the solitary end table lamp. She wore a beige terrycloth robe and her bare legs were tucked up beside her. Her head was bent forward, spilling a fall of shiny hair down her shoulders. She was engrossed in writing a letter. Five handwritten pages lay next to her feet, and her lap held

a piece of powder blue stationery, supported by the latest issue of *Glamour* magazine.

He dropped heavily into a rocking chair and faced her. She acknowledged him with a smile, but kept her head down as she busily scrawled. While she did, he let himself admire his daughter. She was the most beautiful thing alive. Instead of having his squat frame, beak nose, and drooping jowls, she had her mother's lithe frame, cute nose with a little upturn, and high cheek bones. Her hair was hers alone, though. Her mother had not been that perfect. His daughter was. She was meant to have the world at her feet. She deserved the very best. Something he had never attained for her mother.

"You're home late," Pam said as she continued to write.

"Couldn't get out of Bernie's. Every time I got up to leave, someone would order me another round or start tellin' some joke I didn't want to miss."

Pam didn't comment. She kept on moving her ballpoint pen across the page.

"And how 'bout you?" he questioned. "It's way past midnight and here you are by yourself, doing something that looks like work."

"I couldn't sleep. Had to do this."

"And what's this? Are you writing a letter or a novel?" he asked and smiled at his humor.

"It's a letter. I don't think I'm the Margaret Mitchell type," Pam chuckled softly and didn't miss a stroke of her pen.

"To who?"

"It's to Hank."

"Hank!" He raised his voice and his eyebrows. His jaw fell. The smile faded. His joints in his legs throbbed, his breathing became faster. "What the hell for? He just left the other day. You can't even have an address."

Pam now looked up from her writing. Her expression turned from thoughtful to drawn. She didn't feel as if she had to explain. "I don't," she said softly, "I'll have to wait until he sends me one before I can mail it."

"Swell, I can't see why you're writing him already. Seems like you've said everything you could possibly say while he was here."

Her first impulse was to take refuge in her bedroom, away from the impending conversation. But she thought better of it and decided to weather it once more. "I miss him. I've got to do something and this makes me feel close to him. Like...like I'm talking to him. Like my thoughts are with him in some sort of spiritual way."



Fred Sadler pushed back in his rocker, took a long swallow of beer, and then stared up at the pool of light on the ceiling. “Uh-huh,” he belched as he seemed to be inspecting the plaster. “Seems to me you ought to be spending time with Dave Watson, not thinking about Hank. You know Dave’s reporting soon to the Miami Dolphins rookie camp. He’s a third-round draft choice. He’s gotta good shot at making the team. Especially with the Dolphins. They need all the help they can get.”

“We’ve been through it before, Daddy.” Pam tried to keep her voice steady. Why couldn’t her father understand her feelings? “Dave and I are through,” she told him. “He knows how I feel about Hank.”

“Then why does he still call?”

“Dave isn’t the type that can take no for an answer. He’s always had his own way; so he keeps buggin’ me, thinking I’ll come around and see the so-called ‘light.’”

“I keep thinkin’ that, too,” he sighed remorsefully. “You’ve got a football star, who’ll make a ton of lettuce as a pro, he’s nuts about you, and you can’t give ’em the time of day. Instead, you think you’re hooked on a guy that studied to be a garbage man. Christ! Hasn’t my daughter learned anything?”

“Hank’s not a garbage man!” Pam protested. “Can’t you realize that? He specialized in sanitary engineering. He’s an engineer, not a garbage man. Why can’t you like him? Why do you have to cut him down?”

Her tone upset him. He gulped down a sizable portion of Blue Ribbon, gasped, then sucked in a lungful of air, and exhaled a reply. “I’ve tried, Pam. He’s not what I want for a son-in-law. He hates to hunt. Fishin’s not his bag. I don’t even think the guy likes football, if you can believe that. That’s almost un-American. We got nothin’ in common.”

Pam grew irritable. “How about what I want, what your daughter wants? Hank’s a very sensitive person. He’s extremely intelligent, too. He doesn’t like hunting and that sort of thing because he’s the conservationist type. He’d rather see an animal alive than dead. And believe me, the world needs more of his kind.”

“Uh-huh,” he grunted. “If that’s the case, he should’ve burned his draft card with the other slimy cowards instead of ending up on his way to Vietnam.”

“He didn’t want to go in the Army,” she said, disregarding the remark about coward. “His father pushed him into ROTC and he got obligated. He tried to transfer to the Medical Service but they wouldn’t let him.”

Fred Sadler's lips curled maliciously. "His old man probably made him take Rotcee to make a man out of him. That I can see. Too bad he's not going to a real war like your dad was in. Don't forget, Pam, I was in the Marines and served on Guadalcanal. Now, that was a Goddamn war," he stated proudly.

"I thought you were in a support unit that didn't get in the fighting." Pam shot back. Her words frosted.

The remark caught him off guard. His jowls started quivering slightly and his eyes narrowed into slits. Pam looked away. She had seen this expression too many times before and hated it.

"There was fighting! It was ten times worse than those guys fightin' them VC," he said defensively. "We had it rough like everyone else. Your Hank will have it easy compared to the stuff most of us leathernecks went through. If he gets a Purple Heart, it'll be from some VD he'll pick up in a Saigon bar."

"That's not true!" she shouted back. Tears filled her eyes and she trembled noticeably. "Everything you've said is not true. People are dying over there. Can't you understand that? I may never see him again!"

At this outbreak, he stormed up from his chair, setting it madly in motion. He couldn't reason with her. She didn't know what a real war was all about. Hank wouldn't either. *At least he was out of the picture for a year*, Fred thought as he stomped from the room. That would be time enough to get Pam to "see the light," as Dave termed it.

Alone in the room, an empty chair rocking slowly back and forth, Pam held her tear streaked cheeks in her hands. She felt overwhelmed with loneliness. The gap between Pam and her father was tearing wider. She wiped the wetness from her palms on her robe and picked up the pen. She stared at the stationery in her lap, and saw Hank's face among her words.

His physical features were handsome. His brown hair, a shade darker than her own, was parted neatly on the left and he wore it shorter than what the students were now wearing in Gainesville. Still, it was a longer length than what was Army regulation. His complexion tanned a deep brown in the summer sun and the contrast highlighted straight white teeth when he favored her with his broad smile. Then there were his dark eyes. That was his real beauty, because they transcended his physical features. His eyes showed his true self, the inside of him, the warmth, the friendliness, the humor, the compassion, and the love. His eyes also betrayed the fear that she shared with him of the year ahead. "A year is such a long time," she said to herself.

## CHAPTER 3

THE BOEING 707, a tiny moving speck amidst a massive system of runways, access aprons, helipads, and hangars of all shapes and sizes, taxied to its final destination. Inside there was much commotion as heads jockeyed for position to catch their first glimpse of their new environs.

The honey-haired stewardess with the “follow me” hips hurried to the fore section and spoke into a microphone. “Gentlemen, please remain in your seats until you are instructed to leave the airplane,” she instructed them over the intercom.

Slowly, reluctantly, the middle and aisle seat passengers withdrew their faces from the windows and settled down. Then their attention was diverted to the fore section. Honey-hair was opening the forward door. Someone was on the outside, waiting. They watched the door with curiosity.

A young man strode in wearing clean, starched jungle fatigues with a black, first lieutenant’s bar on the right collar and a black wheel, the insignia of the transportation branch, on the left. On the back of his head perched an Army-green baseball cap with a black bar on its raised crown. A Colt .45 automatic hung from his right hip in a black leather flap holster. The edge of a clipboard was on the other hip, held fast by the crook of his arm. He looked like a too-young baseball manager in a funny green uniform with ample pockets. His clipboard was the starting lineup for the day’s game; the pistol suggested there would be no argument over who was playing.

Honey-hair handed him the mic. “Gentlemen,” his voice was soft and steady over the intercom, “I am Lieutenant Blake of the Ninetieth Replacement Battalion in Long Binh. Welcome to Vietnam.” His face lacked the emotion of a warm welcome.

Scattered boos followed. Blake ignored them. Two hundred and eleven days ago he had replied the same. He began to rattle off his patented spiel, his eyes hitting a foot above their heads. "When you leave the plane, you'll form six ranks and move to the baggage platform near the terminal. You'll claim your bags and then place them on four trucks to the right of the platform. Officers' bags on the leading truck, enlisted on the other three. From there you'll proceed to the terminal to do initial in-country processing. Then you'll board buses to Long Binh where you'll await assignment to your unit. Officers will board the first bus. Enlisted the last three." His gaze moved to their faces. "OK, gentlemen, you may now depart the plane."

A blast of hot, moist air smacked into Hank as he stepped outside on the platform of the gangway. His cotton khaki uniform fastened to his body like a piece of gauze sticking to a congealing wound. A blinding glare from a merciless tropical sun reflecting off white concrete caused his eyes to squint as he tried to look around before descending. The great air base before him was only hot, white light, as if from an interrogation lamp. He couldn't answer. He didn't know why he was here.

He followed Dick down and into the third rank which had started to form.

Once in ranks Dick began spewing sarcasm out of the side of his mouth. "All through Benning they kept shittin' on us about bunching together and here we are, lined up like rows of corn waitin' to get plowed under by some VC rocket." He paused to spit, nearly connecting on the heels of a major in the second rank. He wasn't fazed at the near hit and went back to fuming. "Now I know why this place is hell. It's so Goddamn hot! Makes the Canal Zone feel like New Hampshire. Bet I could fry an egg on this concrete."

"It might not always be this hot," was Hank's only reply. He knew Dick was rambling from nervousness just as he was reticent for the same reason. His eyes were adjusting to his environment and he was able to look straight ahead with half-closed eyes between the evenly spaced heads of the front ranks. There were about a hundred meters of open airfield and then a huge corrugated roof supported by tall four-by-fours; it looked like part of an old farmers market. It was the passenger terminal, teeming with khaki clad bodies.

Finally, the ranks were full. Lieutenant Blake nodded to his master sergeant nearby, who marched to the front and faced the contingent. He said, "Gentlemen," to first acknowledge his deference to the commissioned officers in the group, then in perfect parade ground resonance issued a "Right face."

There was a sliding of soles and clicking of heels and then a “Forward march.” Then after fifty meters a “Column left.”

It was not necessary that they keep in step and there was no cadence to help, but for the most part they did.

Hank belonged to the minority that didn't. And he was a minority within a minority as he purposely avoided being in step and even had to skip a few times to avoid accidentally falling in with the majority.

Drawing near the terminal he watched the bodies under the tin roof materialize into faces. Smiling, ebullient faces. Faces going home.

Scattered shouting broke out at the marching incumbents. “Going home! Short! Short! Short!” the faces yelled. A short NCO leaped from the mass, raised his right arm horizontally and began pumping it like a West Point cheerleader at an Army-Navy game. “Three-sixty-five! Come back alive! Three-sixty-five! Come back alive!” he chanted. In unison his chant was picked up and blurted out across the expanse of concrete at the arrivals. “Three-sixty-five! Come back alive...”

“They really make you feel welcome,” Dick muttered behind Hank.

Hank swallowed hard, hoping to dislodge the lump clogging his throat. His eyes glanced down to the moving heels before him. His thoughts strayed to Pam.

A half hour later he and Dick sat perspiring in the lead bus. Casually, like a Greyhound tour guide, Blake stood in the front stairwell waiting for the other buses to fill. The steel gratings on the windows contrasted with his casualness.

Stooping his tall frame, Dick walked down the aisle to Blake and began talking. After a minute he finished and returned to his seat beside Hank.

“What was that all about?” Hank asked.

“Nothing much. I asked him how long we'd be at the 90th before going on to our unit.”

“What did he say?”

“Said he didn't know. Could vary between a day to two weeks, depending on the backlog they gotta push through.”

“I hope it's two weeks.”

The bus jerked forward.

The convoy of olive drab buses and deuce-and-a-half trucks steamed out of the air base, leaving in its wake large reefs of barbed concertina wire and

grottoes formed by sandbags. In the town of Bien Hoa the convoy mingled with a conglomeration of trudging water buffaloes pulling ox carts, honking beat up trucks, sputtering lambrettas, and weaving motor bikes. Brownish yellow tinged pedestrians in conical hats and simple clothes moved all about in seemingly helter-skelter patterns. The convoy passed a gutted block of stucco ruins, further evidence that all was not right in this strange world.

A block farther, amidst one-story stucco shops in faded pastels, was more evidence; a Vietnamese army compound surrounded by a red brick wall garnished on top with plenty of barbed wire. At its corners, sandbagged .50 caliber machine guns glared flagrantly at passersby. Through rusted iron gates could be seen Vietnamese soldiers, the ARVNS, lazily lounging around inside, outfitted in green T-shirts and fatigue pants. Some slept in hammocks hung from posts or truck bumpers or anything else convenient. Pigs and chickens mingled freely and seemed as much a part of the compound as the ARVNS.

After a short while the convoy turned into a wide entrance road guarded by two MPs. Over the gateway, arched in pieced, wood letters were the words "90th Replacement Bn." Behind it was more than a replacement battalion. There was also the huge military installation of Long Binh with sprawling subdivisions of A-framed dwellings, built by the Corps of Engineers and affectionately labeled "hooches" by their residents.