

MEKONG COWBOYS
"SKID MARKS"

a personal narrative by

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Chapter 1

VISIONS OF GLORY

God and soldiers all adore,
In time of war and not before,
In time of peace, when all is righted,
God's forgotten, and soldiers slighted

The now familiar whirrrring noise of the rockets motor slammed my adrenalin into its high performance mode, and just as the sound stopped, without even realizing it, I was in the middle of a swan dive, hanging only inches above the stagnant water in the half filled crater when the brilliant white flash of light and KRRRRRAAAACCCCKKK' of the explosion from the 122 mm rocket pierced the dark calm of the night about 45 yards away. Then 'splaaat' as I belly flopped into the sour pool of water. It smelled like an abandoned septic tank, but it WAS after all refreshingly cool, and I WAS still alive and kicking with no serious leaks, despite this minor inconvenience. I say minor because it seemed to be an almost nightly occurrence here at Rocket City as Dong Tam and many other bases had come to be called. Located on the Mekong River in the central Delta of Vietnam, it was a relatively small base, and the Viet Cong were making sure there was no rest for the weary, especially at night. I slowly sloshed my way out of the water and dragged myself up the slimy side of the little crater, carefully peering over the top and listening intently for any more of the whirring sounds, before dragging my muddy body out and raking several leeches from my bare arms and face. I reached down and grabbed my friend "the Reverend's" hand, half dragging him from the stinking safety of the hole, and helping him brush off his crop of leeches as we gathered up our flight bags, weapons and chicken plates to continue our dark trek from the COWBOY flight line to the relative safety of our hootch and the adjoining bunker. "Charlie's just reminding us that he's not asleep" I told Rev, as we strolled through the haze of smoke and humidity.

The area took on a surreal appearance that made my skin crawl and a chill run over my body. Despite the 100 degree heat and smothering humidity, I suddenly felt cold. The smell in the air was death, and death was the enemy. In my imagination the wisps of smoke resembled swarms of little creatures beckoning us to join them in the belly of the Beast, but I had other plans. I planned to go back to the real World to my wife and 3 kids, in one piece if possible, despite all the best efforts of these little zipper-heads messing with my mind and body.

What the hell am I doing here anyway?, I thought. I'm 28 years old and have a wife and three small children back in the World, for Christ's sake. My military obligation had already been completed two years earlier, as I had served eight and a half years in the Georgia National Guard, which I had joined before anyone I knew had ever heard of this Godforsaken place.

The nearest thing that we had to a crises since I joined the NG, had been the Cuban Crises, and Berlin thing. My outfit had been called to State active duty only once, on April 8, 1968, in order to stand by at Dobbins Air Force base near Atlanta during Martin Luther Kings' funeral in the event riots broke out. To our surprise, we were issued live ammunition, and things were looking pretty bleak. However since nothing happened that the police couldn't handle, we re-boarded the C-119 Flying Boxcars, and prayed the shaking and shuttering old relics would stay together until we arrived at the Naval Air Station at Albany, GA.

Everyone was relieved that the funeral was carried out peacefully, and we resumed our duties as private citizens and week-end warriors.

1960-1961: Thomas Nesbitt, Recruit, E-1, NG24765045; Basic Infantry training at Ft. Jackson, S.C.; Armor (tank) training at Ft. Knox, Ky. Then after only six months I was back to being a week-end warrior with just two weeks of unpleasantness at Ft. Stewart, Ga. each summer.

During our last summer of training as a tank outfit at Ft. Stewart, our Battalion (3rd Bn., 108th Armor, 48th Armored Division) was pitted against aggressors made up of a regular army unit. The regular Army Umpires were led by a group of Lieutenant Colonels, and presided over the war games. In the end they gave our National Guard unit a higher score than the Regular Army aggressors, and declared us the winners. When the Commanding General of Fort Stewart heard of the outcome, he declared the decision invalid, saying that "no National Guard unit is better than a Regular Army unit." I often wondered how a bad sport ever made General to begin with. Maybe his ego just couldn't take losing to a bunch of week-end warriors. The retraction didn't really bother us though, because unlike the General, we could be good winners or losers; it was just a summer game as far as we were concerned, and most of us enjoyed it.

The 18 months I had previously spent attending OCS at Georgia Military Institute had not been pleasant, but being a 2nd Lieutenant did have its advantages, both in pay and exemption from K.P. and latrine duty, among

other undesirable inconveniences. The guys in the local unit, with whom I had grown up, played the game, saluting and sir-ing me as expected while at drills. I was very careful not to ever be the hard-ass type, (which never really works anyway) and we all remained friends.

I have always been of the opinion that a local National Guard unit, given equal training, would out perform a Regular Army unit most of the time anyway. This was because of the closer friendships, and kinships, between the troops in the unit. They were less apt to have problems than a more diverse group, and more likely to look out for their buddies' welfare in tight situations.

The Guard had made the monthly payments on my first new car, a blue 1964 Ford GALAXY 500 Fastback, window sticker price \$3,185.00, and a few years later an air conditioned `67 Galaxy 500 with a real F.M. radio and automatic transmission. After the payment, I even had change left over.

SOUNDS... That's where it all started. Back in the early 60's the 11th Air Assault Division (later the 1st Cav Division Airmobile) had chosen the local airfield in my home town in Southwest Georgia to develop a new concept called "air mobility." All day and night I could hear them, coming and going, Whop-whop-Whop-whop. It seemed to have an almost hypnotic affect on me.

I was 23 years old and had just been commissioned a 2nd Lieutenant, and by act of Congress an Officer and a Gentleman. I was feeling really gung-ho, patriotic and full of piss and vinegar. I FELT like a real soldier, and found myself going to the airfield nearly every day to watch in amazement as the Huey's, C-7A, DH Caribou's, and other Army aircraft came and went with their training. I had no idea what they were training to do, and it didn't really matter, because I knew what I wanted to do. I wanted to fly one of those fancy little helicopters. I made up my mind right then and there that one way or another I was going to do it, because I felt like that was where I belonged.

In early 1968, a letter came down from the Department of the Army to National Guard units asking for volunteers for active duty. Some little place I had barely heard of in Southeast Asia was apparently putting a strain on Uncle Sam. While I HAD heard of it, I probably couldn't find it on a map if my life depended on it. Recently it had been on the evening news almost daily, and the main reason I watched the news was so I could see those fancy little helicopters at work.

They fascinated me, but later it never crossed my mind that some of those GI's on the news, getting their asses shot off and coming home in body bags, may have been some of the same Army aviators, and Cav troops who I had watched train at our local airfield. Now the Army wanted volunteers! Well, wasn't that a lucky break for me? Here I was, a knight in shining armor, just waiting for an opportunity like this.

My Father, and his three brothers had all served in World War II, and most of my ancestors faithfully served their Country in it's time of need, so if the Army wanted warm

bodies badly enough, maybe, just MAYBE I could get them to let me fly one of those fancy little helicopters. Then I would have taken care of MY generation's military obligation in full, and not by just putting in time with the National Guard, as I had for the past eight years. Patriotism was alive and well in South Georgia in 1968..... at least with me anyway. I never said I was smart.

I figured I could probably get myself stationed at Ft. Benning, Georgia, and commute back and forth every day, just like a regular job. That little skirmish in Southeast Asia would probably be all over with by the time I got halfway through flight school, and they might even do some more training at the local airfield so that all my friends and neighbors could come out and watch me fly. Now wouldn't I be the luckiest young trooper who ever strapped on a helicopter? The glory of it all! And they would even pay me to do it. I discussed my dreams of becoming a helicopter pilot with my wife and family, and once they agreed, I contacted the Pentagon to attempt to bargain myself into Army Aviation Helicopter School.

Since my National Guard unit had been changed from Armor to Infantry Branch around 1967, I did my dealing with a Major in Infantry Branch at the Pentagon. I was informed that the only way to guarantee me flight school was for me to take and pass, both a written and flight physical exam at Ft. Benning. The Major made the arrangements, and I passed both tests in short order.

After being assured Flight school, I completed the transfer to active duty in November 1968. Since it would be several months before a new flight training class would have a slot for me, I requested permission to attend Ranger School and was admitted. I reasoned that if I didn't make it through Flight School, I would wind up a Grunt, (infantryman), and discretion being the better part of valor, the training received in Ranger School would be a big plus for me in the survival department. I arrived at Ft. Benning on 12 November 1968, feeling that my daily runs around the farm for the past five months had put me into better than average physical condition. I felt very positive about completing Ranger School, though I knew that it would be most difficult. It was! Little did I realize what I was getting into.

First we were stripped of all identity and individualism. All insignia was removed from our fatigue uniforms, including my cherished 1st Lieutenant bar. Everybody was nobody, and nobody was everybody! This left only our name tag, "U.S. Army," and of course the ever present dog tags, which were covered with rubber liners to prevent their rattling.

Our heads were shaved, and we were assured that from now until the end of the course, we were less than nothing. We were not to speak unless spoken to, and then, our first words would always be "Sir! Ranger Jones Sir!" or whatever our name was. We were not allowed to walk. We must run whenever we moved from point "A" to point "B".

Everybody had a `Ranger Buddy' from the very beginning of the program, and Ranger Buddies always looked after one another in any situation, no matter what. If you fell out of a run, your `Ranger Buddy' would drop back with you and carry you if necessary, to

the very end. If heat exhaustion began to set in, he would pour water from his canteen over your head in order to help lower your body temperature and increase your endurance. The two of you were actually one...a team.

One period of training especially sticks in my mind. Our day always began around 0300 hours (3:00 A.M. for you guys from Rio Alto, CA), with formation, roll call, and the obstacle course. This consisted, among other things, of a low crawl through a ditch of filthy water. At that particular time of year, an unusually cold fall, the water seemed to be iced over every morning. Part of the training involved participating in bayonet training. We were taught all the techniques of bayonet fighting, with our victims being dummies. It seems that the purpose of this training was to instill the will to kill, without hesitation or remorse. Over and over, the instructor would shout, "What is the Spirit of the bayonet?", and we would all scream at the top of our lungs, "To KILL!"

This training was always held at night, or at least very early in the morning while it was still dark. Looking back, I think that the training had some sort of a brainwashing effect upon us, as we charged our victims, screaming, "KILL, KILL, KILL" as loud as we could, impaling the enemy on the bayonet, and then, just to make sure, slamming him in the face with the butt of the rifle. This was our daily ritual, until the instructors were reasonably sure that we were all first rate "KILLERS," in the finest sense of the word, then we went on to something a little more civilized. My personal opinion about bayonet fighting is that when such an opportunity presents itself, it is definitely time for a retrograde movement. In other words, "Time to haul ass to a safer area!" if possible!

However, I have realized over the years that, while an individual is trained, brainwashed or programmed, to KILL without hesitation or remorse, I have never heard of a period of training in which they were DE-PROGRAMMED. I feel that prior to discharge, every soldier should have this killer mindset reversed, if possible. Maybe 6 months of Bible School, or something like that.

We climbed through a series of log towers, jumped over, and crawled under log barricades, leapt out about eight feet over water to grab, and hopefully hold onto a rope, and climb it to the top of another tower, then swing on another rope to dry land. It was a little like playing Tarzan, except we weren't King of squat, much less the jungle.

While being subjected to all this, we of course were being constantly screamed at, degraded, and given push ups. We climbed a log pole around fifty feet high, grabbed a steel bar attached to the roller on a cable at the top, and rolled on the cable for about two hundred yards across a lake, to drop into the water just before hitting the pole on the opposite side.

After this, we took our morning run, and we ran and ran and ran some more. Then came more harassment in the mess hall line, and after doing "X" number of push ups and chin-ups, we were allowed to wolf down a hearty breakfast. The food was excellent by the way.

During the day we attended and participated in various classes and training, intended to push us beyond our mental and physical limitations, and yet allow us to still be able to function well as Infantry leaders. It was during one of these training periods that I met my "Waterloo."

Around the end of the second or third week, we were participating in the hand-to-hand combat course, which was a usual part of the training. We were paired off randomly, and on this particular day we were practicing in the art of disabling an attacker by blocking his blow or thrust with a knife, then grabbing the enemy by the neck and arm, and tossing him over our shoulder. We then simulated kicking him in the groin. When I say simulate, I mean we were supposed to kick the aggressor high on the inside of the thigh with the flat instep of our boot. Well, since I was 5' 10" and 160 pounds soaking wet, I naturally drew as a partner a 6' 4" 200 pound "Arnold Swartzneger" type. Murphy's Law was alive and well.

That unfortunate morning, "Arnold" and I were switching about throwing and kicking one another. After about a half an hour, Arnold's turn came again. He threw me over his shoulder and accidentally kicked me like a mule, square in the testicles. My lights went out for an unknown period of time. (This reinforced the lesson for me, that if I ever wanted to put someone down, this was the way to do it.)

When I regained what was left of my composure, my Ranger Buddy was right there to help me hobble through the balance of the day's training. With his help, I somehow made it till lights out (around 2330 hours/11:30 P.M.).

At 0300 hours the next morning, I was REALLY hurting, but with my Buddy's help, I somehow managed to make it through the obstacle course and run. How, I'll never know. Coming up on 0700 hours, we were outfitted with a full pack and weapon for a seven mile "force march". I made it about a mile, and my knees buckled. I convinced my Buddy that he would have to go on without me this time, for sure. I was, for all practical purposes, "dead in the water." My scrotum was the size of a softball and growing, and I was walking like I had a load in my britches, as my Granddaddy used to say.

My Ranger Buddy, a young 2nd Lieutenant from Wisconsin, and I had become very close friends from the start. If one of us had any kind of problem, the other would always be there to help...except this time there was really nothing he or anyone else could do for me.

I was taken to the first aid area, where I was checked out by a medic. After I dropped my drawers, he took one look, and made it quite clear that my Ranger training was at the very least, at a temporary halt. This meant that as far as this class was concerned, I was out of there for some light duty time. I was very disappointed, knowing that if I were allowed to come back at all, it would be in another class. I would have to start all over again at some future time, and with a new Ranger Buddy. However, due to the extent of my injury, I seriously doubted that it would be possible to complete such rigorous training, even at a later date.

After a week of recuperation, I was enrolled in the Infantry Officers Basic Course, (IOBC) which I knew I would have to attend at some point anyway. Without boring you with the details of this period of time, it is sufficient to say that I sailed through IOBC like a dose of salts through a goose, getting an unexpected promotion to Captain along the way.

A vacancy in Flight School still hadn't opened up for me. Meanwhile, my request for jump (Airborne) school was granted and began about a week after graduation from IOBC. For reasons yet unknown to me, I was appointed Student Company Commander of the class. There were two Air Force Majors in our class, one of whom I felt this job (Company Commander) should go to. Maybe they didn't want it, or maybe my being the ranking Army Infantry officer in the class had something to do with it. For whatever reason, I was stuck with the job. The training probably would have seemed strenuous had I not been previously exposed to part of Ranger training. For my part, it was a breeze, and I must say, one of the most interesting periods of training I had ever had.

In retrospect, I should have attended Airborne school first, and then Ranger training. The whole course was basically to insure motivation, physical fitness, and to perfect the art of parachuting, emergency procedures, exiting the aircraft, steering, and landing properly. It was an automatic Article 15, (Non Judicial Punishment) if you failed to fall and roll properly on landing. I found that I had to force myself to do this on every jump. Due to good weather conditions and light winds during our training period, it would have been simple to remain standing after touchdown on all my jumps, but I understood the purpose behind the 'fall and roll,' since one sudden change in the wind could cause the trooper to have a hard or miscalculated landing, possibly causing broken bones and/or to be dragged helplessly.

At our Airborne graduation, I was quite surprised to be awarded the Outstanding Student Graduate, which consisted of a written letter in my records and a small silver statue of a Paratrooper in full gear. This award was supposedly made by secret ballot by members of the class, but maybe they just gave it to all the student company commanders, I don't know. I do know that I did nothing that I thought deserved it. I had only tried to keep the company motivated in part by telling them constantly that the Blackhats (instructors) all had to go through this same training at one time, and that they put their pants on one leg at the time every morning just like we did, so no sweat, just play the game.

Upon graduation from jump school, and being no longer considered a "LEG", I was given the opportunity to re-enroll in the next Ranger training cycle. My reply: "Not for a million bucks! I would rather go straight to Vietnam". My previous injury was no longer a big problem, but there was no doubt in my mind that if I returned to Ranger School, it would in all likelihood become aggravated again, and I didn't want surgery, or anything else to keep me out of Flight school.

The next several months were spent as Assistant Operations Officer (Training) in one of the Basic Training Battalions, U.S. Army Infantry Training Center, in the Harmony Church area of Ft. Benning. During this time I would usually drive the 90 miles to my home town on weekends, unless I had Officer of the Day or some other weekend duties.

"This is going just like I planned", I thought, "driving to work on Monday morning, and driving back home to the Family on Friday afternoon for the weekend".

to be continued.....