

from The Tragedy of the Hamlet: by G. David O'Leary c1999. Ch 16 of 20.

CHAPTER 16 - LZ CHARLIE BROWN

I should have called this Chapter "Paradise Lost," but I had already used up that phrase in a previous Chapter.

To this day, I don't know the official reasoning for the creation and maintenance of "Landing Zone (LZ) Charlie Brown," which was located way to the South in I Corps, almost at the border with II Corps. I can speculate that it might have been created by some high-ranking Army or Marine commander for his son-in-law's tenure in Vietnam; or something really slimy like that, probably having nepotism as its source.

Charlie Brown's location, configuration and size didn't even come close to measuring up to the business and war-like makeup of a typical working "landing zone" or "firebase". It was an anomaly. The only traits it had in common with a real firebase were: it was a hill, it had a field kitchen, and it had bunkers.

Significantly, it had no artillery, no Battalion or other staff Tactical Operations Center (TOC), no Signal Corps communication installation, no stockpile of fuel or supplies, and no permanent party troops of any nature, except for two insipid cooks who resided like cockroaches, or rather "infested," the dark and dank wood and sandbag structure housing that which served as a field kitchen.

These two RAMFs (Rear Area Mother Fuckers) wisely kept to themselves and maintained a very low profile. They were not stupid, and surely realized that field troops hate RAMFs, and will seize upon any reason to pick a fight. The sheer numerical odds and general atmosphere weren't good for "Cookie" in this case, especially considering our recent Christmas Dinner fiasco, in which they admittedly had no real complicity.

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To say that we all had heard wonderful things about LZ Charlie Brown would be an understatement; albeit only third hand from a few grunts who met some grunts at Chu Lai, who in turn knew some grunts who once had the pleasure of spending a month or so on Charlie Brown. I didn't really believe the triple-hearsay hype until I saw the base with my own four eyes.

The lush hill consisted of a stunningly beautiful island in the South China Sea, rising sharply a hundred feet or so high, located within a hand-grenade's throw of the mainland. (I know this as a fact.) Under other circumstances, Hilton would have given his left arm for the real estate.

It was situated directly across from the picturesque fishing town of Sa Hwyn. [phonetic.]

The island was so small that the rocked road circling its emerald crest was a bit smaller than a standard 1/4 mile running track. This pathway was more or less oval, and its deep beige gravel surface was apparently responsible for maintaining its manicured shape and consistency, preventing erosion from water runoff. (My love of the LZ Charlie Brown memory probably has jaded my recollection - - I doubt if it was “manicured” at all.) [My recollection, however is manicured, to a great extent. In truth, I often dream about LZ Charlie Brown, and the good times there.]

Strangely, the chopper pad was located way down at the *base* of the hill, and on the *town* side of the island at that, instead of more near the top of the hill on the seaside, which would be more secure, strategic and practical.

There were good access paths off the gravel road, running up and down to spacious bunkers constructed of thick wood and galvanized corrugated steel culverts, covered by layers of dark green fiberglass sandbags. The sandbags seemed to have been emplaced by architectural students or some other perfectionists alien to most other Army defensive construction. (Probably more of my imagination, and dreams. Anyway, I repeat, this is a book of fiction, in the main. The Statute of Limitations has long since run, I trust.)

The bunkers could accommodate about ten men each. There were approximately fifteen bunkers in all, including a larger command-type structure, which was within the perimeter, thank God. Just the right accommodations for a rifle company, but no room for anybody else.

My C.P. (Command Post) group, consisting of about six men and I “crashed” (took up residence) in the large “central” bunker. There was plenty of room, at least by Infantry standards. In other words, you didn’t have to step on somebody to get in or out.

Like the chopper pad, this “command bunker” had a questionable location. It was situated smack on the Western, or town side, of the island.

Most of the perimeter defensive ten-man bunkers enjoyed a seaside view of the turquoise South China Sea. Bunkers on the West faced the town, and those on the North looked toward “Gilligan’s Island,” a flat piece of land of about four acres, which appeared to have been at one time an empty sandbar. Its surface had obviously had been compacted and flattened for some asphalt paving and the construction of adjacent concrete seaside docking.

The U.S. Navy maintained a unit of fifty or so men on Gilligan's Island. They seemed to spend most of their time tending and guarding several gray barges and some vessels that looked to me like World War II landing craft. The buildings on Gilligan's Island were more permanent, and similar to the WW II "temporary barracks" of Fort Leonard Wood, with sandbags laid about 3/4 of the way to the rooftops. They are probably comfortably housing some Ho Chi Minh's troops today.

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The relatively small chopper pad at the base of Charlie Brown had a sandy access road running up to the gravel road at an inordinately steep angle. Another reason not to have a resupply point at that location, since the troops had to lug the heavy supplies uphill with virtually no cover or concealment.

The focal point of my memory of the whole thing, was that the little pad sported a huge plywood painted replica of the Charlie Brown character himself, waving; and with a cartoon message coming out of his stupid mouth: "Welcome to LZ Charlie Brown!"

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Out of the blue, while working the steamy coastal area, my Company was ordered to "proceed on foot down Highway One to the town of Sa Hwyn, and then due east to LZ Charlie Brown, and occupy its perimeter until further notice."

We were about fifteen kilometers away, and it was already high noon.

"You can't miss it, go through the town and look for the big 'Charlie Brown' sign."

I had the Company take the standard configuration for a long daytime hump down the jinxed Highway, two long columns, one on each side of the paved road. We walked south in the hot sun, which baked our heads under our helmets, and unmercifully punished the skin. The troops maintained about a ten meter interval, and kept a watchful eye all around at ground level.

While we moved along, cursing the hot asphalt, I thought how lucky we were to have not only "air superiority," but complete control of the air ("air supremacy") - - no North Vietnamese planes overhead to make strafing or bombing runs. Not that there wasn't a whole laundry list of other very unpleasant potential surprises in and around the infamous "Street Without Joy" where

we had found ourselves. (Vietnam's Highway One.)

Overloaded garish colored busses (pied - mainly orange and red) and Army and Marine convoys roared past, and the smell of their invisible gasoline and highly visible black diesel fumes was nauseating. But getting off the paved road would have only meant brutal ankle action under our heavy loads, and would leave the whole issue of undetected mines and booby traps more than open for consideration.

South Vietnamese Army soldiers wizzed by on their annoying motorbikes and Lambretta scooters, and of course a few of our zanier troops tried to "clothesline" any of those arrogant bastards dumb enough to pass within reach, with their outstretched sunburned tattooed forearms.

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As standard survival procedure, I kept well away from virtually all antennae, and hid my map and binoculars in my rucksack. (A generally accepted practice thought to preclude snipers from targeting those dumb enough to display such indicia of dubious authority.) I had already told Mitch to call the First Sergeant, who was in the rear with the gear at our Duc Pho base camp, and have the 81mm mortar tubes, base plates aiming devices and plenty of mortar rounds sent out to LZ Charlie Brown on the next chopper. I had been advised that there was no indigenous artillery or other large caliber defensive weapons on the hill. (Why?)

I kept asking myself enroute, what type of an installation could this be? Maybe an important radar or communications relay site, or something like that, yea.

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The only memorable incident on the fifteen kilometer overheated "forced march" was the specter of some of the CP guys' toppling a couple of South Vietnamese Army soldiers off a small bridge, and a playful guy from the first platoon flipping a hot grenade into the water for effect.

A few dead fish had immediately popped up, and the irate swimmers probably suffered tinnitus for a day or two. Too bad - - they would have been unable to hear the laughing - - Itself a rarity on a forced march under full load.

As we approached the town of Sa Hwyn, we were besieged by every type of vendor imaginable. The entire vicinity was more touristy and its inhabitants better organized for fleecing the foreigner than in any other Vietnamese town in my limited experience. As we proceeded through the village proper, I observed quite a few American civilians, probably members of evangelic groups. Significantly, I noticed some pickup trucks and farm machinery with

“USAID” stenciled markings. Now we were getting somewhere! Civilization! America!

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After trudging through the village, we all eventually boarded the makeshift ferry with its flotation limit of about forty troops. The ferry was propelled back and forth across the small channel from the mainland to the island “firebase”, with stone-age ropes and pulleys.

There wasn’t an American Army soldier in sight. My CP group and I were in the first “lift” climbing like happy kids up the slope to the area of the command bunker.

As usual, the entire hill was full of filth and litter from the last unit. It was S.O.P. (Standing Operating Procedure - - custom) that the new unit always ended up cleaning up after the sins of the one it had replaced. The trash consisted of the usual remnants

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of Asian war and its accompanying debauchery. The interior of the command bunker didn’t give a clue as to the identity of the Infantry company which last had the pleasure of its protection and shelter, only that it was quite typical in its legacy of voluminous trash and general filth.

As the remaining three other groups of forty or so men crossed over on the low-riding ferry, I made myself at home in the large bunker by selecting just the *right* spot to “crash” (dump and lay out my equipment and the meager contents of my rucksack). The CP guys were busy setting up the radios, pulling them off the backs of sweating RTOs (radio-telephone operators); and placing them in line on the long makeshift shelf consisting of wooden ammo boxes supported by layers of green sandbags.

The edifice became our instant Company tactical operations center (“TOC”) - - and home for the new lords of the Charlie Brown feudal manor!

Of course, we all comported ourselves like kids with birthday toys.

I summoned the two resident cooks, and warned that my guys’ hostility could be triggered by just a few drinks; and that they really should keep to themselves for their own good. On the other hand, I granted them the privilege of going into town at their leisure, so long as there were no unresolved valid complaints from my men concerning hot meals or service. I exempted them from all other duties, including perimeter guard duty. (This gesture was not really magnanimous. I had already determined that most RAMFs could be hazardous in a serious firefight when mixed in like that.)

I warned that their “town” privilege should be cherished, since I was not about to bestow it

upon my own people. (I already had a very bad experience in that regard during a previous brief firebase palace guard stint - - also cut brief.)

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I conditionally granted permission for the Vietnamese townspeople selling items and services, from popcorn vendors to pimps, to come up onto Charlie Brown after a cursory screening by one of our guys stationed in the bunker nearest the ferry dock. They were informed that they had to be off the island an hour before nightfall.

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Anyway, after my discussion with the cooks, it was clear that these people already had the run of the base for years, even all night. They had the lay of the land, and therefore any intelligence they could ever hope to derive regarding the defense of the island. Experience dictated that it would be better to control them on *our* turf than have my guys God-knows-where within the rather large town, causing God-knows-what type of problems for D Company and the United States of America.

Looking back, my insistence on this exclusionary measure probably contributed to my undoing and the unfortunate demise of the town of Sa Hwyn as then constituted.

My edict was a terrible disappointment for the merchants and pimps. Their “spokesman” used one of his few five-syllable “Engrish” words on me: “Unacceptable!” The other big word he flaunted was: “Inappropriate!” - - - both butchered adjectives referring to my firm order forbidding town visits for their potential customers, clients and johns.

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Nevertheless, things had gone well the first night, which passed quickly. At daybreak, we had sort of a Barnum and Bailey Circus parade lined up at the mainland ferry dock for transport, and I thought the island might sink once the full crowd was aboard. A few guys from the Navy came over, apparently looking for their favorite whores, who were probably in the bunkers cashing in already.

I was going to kick them off the firebase (the sailors, that is), until an Ensign (a Navy officer

with a rank equivalent to an Army's Second Lieutenant) introduced himself and invited all the D Company "officers" to a "dining in" at the undoubtedly posh officers' mess at Gilligan's, once we "settled in."

This gentleman didn't seem to understand that when we slipped off our rucksacks and webgear and let them drop to the floor of the bunker, we *were* "settled in." Parenthetically, we never were able to take advantage of his invitation and have a gander at their dining facility.

Anyway, since I had rubbed elbows with people from that branch of service during my joint-service tour of duty in the Dominican Republic, I realized that Naval officers had a completely different understanding of the dichotomy between officers and enlisted personnel.

The guys from my CP group would probably be expected to wait on us at Gilligan's Island, since Naval officers consider themselves some sort of *nobility*, with enlisted personnel their minions.

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I tried hard to milk the friendly Ensign for some useful information regarding the general area and situation, but he had only been in country for about a week. He kept apologizing that he wasn't "settled in" yet, *even* after a week!

I had second (and even third) thoughts right from jump street regarding my fostering this carnival atmosphere, especially since hard liquor and drugs had already made their presence. But, It wouldn't have been wise to try to slam the brakes hard on all that merriment right then, without letting some of those mind-altering substances wear off.

As a stopgap measure, I immediately cut back on the number of visitors drastically and made some very unpopular rules. It had *already* become apparent that the pimps and vendors were going to need an armored car to transport their loot off Charlie Brown.

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That's when the light bulb went on as to why we were there.

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You see, my men had been in the bush for over two months. When they finally did get a few days' break at the dusty Duc Pho base area a few weeks before Charlie Brown, they were on a very short leash (and spiked chokechain).

When soldiers first arrived at the big depots in Vietnam in their transport planes or ships, they were required to exchange all their U.S. currency for Military Payment Certificates ("MPCs") in equal denominations (like Monopoly money). MPCs were good on all government facilities. When departing Vietnam for R&R or returning to The World, any reasonable amount of MPCs would be exchanged for U.S. Dollars.

The local currency was the "Piaster," also available in paper. The official rate was so many Piasters to a Dollar (or MPC), and of course the black market rate was figured at so many (more) Piasters to the buck. Locals were technically not allowed to possess or spend MPCs. This became, as expected, a major playing field for graft and black marketeering.

Every so often, without prior notice, the United States Armed Forces in Vietnam would declare say, the yellow colored MPCs to be void, and issue maybe green MPCs to troops holding yellow MPCs. Locals holding yellow MPCs were, of course, shit out of luck. Again, another source of graft and black market operations. During a small time

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window, enterprising RAMFS could acquire cheap yellow MPCs with Piasters, or even green MPCs with deep discounted yellow MPCs if they had the right connections. And as God made little green and yellow apples, you know that some privileged enterprising "clerks and jerks" did have such advance warning.

Some of the guys had a plethora of convoluted theories on this subject, but fate looked unfavorably upon them by making them grunts and not RAMFs. Otherwise, I might be looking some up today to try to mooch rides on their personal jets. Some was forced by circumstances to stick to precious metals and rusty pliers (for gold teeth from the plethora of everyday fresh cadavers). I can say that I never witnessed the extraction of gold teeth from a living human, whether friend or enemy, ever.

Our company had been paid in MPCs over the previous months, and indeed many men had them stashed in their rucksacks. We're talking \$200.00-\$500.00 per grunt, even after allotments had been deducted from pay and sent home. So an average Infantry company walking was

around the host country with at least \$100,000.00 or so in this currency. Nothing to sneeze at in the late '60s.

So why would I not be surprised if we were sent to a place where a small fortune would definitely be blown on a limited number of circus people in a couple of weeks?

Whether there really was anybody sinister behind the Charlie Brown thing or not would be pure speculation and anybody's guess; but after reading about the Sergeant Major of the Army, the top enlisted man, being exposed and eventually successfully prosecuted for his far reaching black market operations, I would certainly not rule out such activity or official complicity.

Significantly, my naivete and, we could say, total ignorance as to such matters at the time may have directly resulted in the "Paradise Lost."

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The next day, I clamped way down on the number of visitors, and set up the D Company Customs and Immigration & Naturalization Service operation on the island side of the ferry operation. This was likewise "unacceptable" and "inappropriate," according to Mr. FuManChu. But he wasn't too pushy, like a PRU, just extremely opinionated. I asked: "Oh, is that your opinion?" He said "Yes, it is." When jokingly told him that opinions are like assholes, that everybody has one, the sourpuss didn't even crack a smile and show a black betttlenut tooth.

Not long thereafter, a day at Charlie Brown was characterized by another five-syllable word "unforgettable."

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I had found a very nice "chaise lounge" made of wooden ammo boxes, and dragged it over to the TOC bunker and hoisted it up onto the sandbagged roof. I was sitting in the chair in my shorts drinking a beer, enjoying the view of the town and fishing dock, and reading an old magazine.

There were twenty or so small but picturesque motorized fishing boats constructed mainly of reed, and the usual netting hanging on racks and shacks on the sandy wharf. I wondered why

these people were not out fishing. (Probably they had enough income from all the suckers on Charlie Brown.)

As I took a drag of my cold, cold Canadian beer, a round shot by my left ear so close that it was like a sharp slap along the side of my head. I couldn't believe it, and froze. After about three seconds, another round came by a little higher, right over my scalp. I was in the cross-hairs of a sniper positioned right in the so-called "friendly" village of Sa Hwyn! ("Friendly" to whom?)

I rolled off the wooden chair, and kept the soles of my feet toward the direction of fire (secretly hoping for a round in the foot to send me home?), putting my entire lower body in the way of my vitals, and did a squirming, panting, low-crawl on the hot green fiberglass sandbags, toward the east, much like a frightened lizard. I dropped down head first off the roof and into the dirt on the far side of the bunker.

I almost broke my goddam neck falling off, even though the earth was soft and I had my arms extended ahead of me to break my fall. This entire movement was worthy of one of those TV shows featuring outrageously comical and embarrassing videos. I was livid, and hoarse from cursing. Some of the hot fiberglass covering the sandbags had burned into the skin of my chest, elbows and knees.

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I had trouble convincing a few troops that they had to kick the locals off the island and take cover in the bunkers. They threw a lot of locals off and went into the bunkers all right, but I certainly didn't see any *females* leaving the island as I watched the ferry go back and forth, while peering through the portholes of my bunker. One cook was still in town. (Maybe it was the cook! Naw, no real motive. And they are usually really lousy shots.)

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After about ten minutes of running between bunkers convincing people to stay put, my CP group, *after recovering from their laughter at my fall*, also reverted to a regular gait. After an hour or so everyone came out like roaches out of the woodwork. We *all* wanted to believe that some nut case in town had gotten off a couple of rounds, and was wrestled to the ground and beat senseless by some of our enterprising new "friends;" and that nothing like this would ever again

be tolerated!

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Nothing happened the rest of that day, or the next. Nevertheless, the 81mm mortars were set up and made operational near the top of the hill, a construction of a defensive sandbag wall for the mortar crew was undertaken. We moved most of the very effective M-60 machineguns into the bunkers facing the village side.

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By this juncture, D Company had a *lot* more M-60 machineguns than authorized by its TO&E (Table of Organization and Equipment). Whenever we rescued a chopper crew or guarded the bird, we would “liberate” the temporarily abandoned machineguns (and any other weapons) for our own future use, and for barter.

Quite a few of our M-60 machineguns therefore had the trigger configurations for firing with both hands and the thumbs, like the gunners had on a vintage aircraft, tracked vehicle, or vessel. This drew a lot of stares and double-takes from chopper pilots and crewmembers, as well as my bosses. We were constantly interrogated by the S-4 people (Battalion Supply) regarding our inordinate requests for M-60 ammo on the resupply runs. (We had the firepower of maybe *two* rifle companies, before the year was over.)

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During our last year as Cadets, my West Point Class (1965) was flown down to Fort Benning, Georgia (The “Home” of the Infantry branch) and seated in bleachers facing a huge firing range full of bunkers, personnel silhouettes, and junked military vehicles. We were treated to a “Mad Minute,” a display of one full minute’s duration of the firepower of a disciplined rifle company on line. The Infantry branch did not want future officers to be left unimpressed by the relatively low caliber weapons of this killing machine, and have the Infantry branch selection eclipsed by the awesome display of firepower we had witnessed at the Artillery branch center at Fort Sill, and the Armor branch at Fort Knox. (Didn’t really make sense - - since Cadets were able to choose Engineer, Armor, Artillery, Signal Corps, or Infantry branch allocations according to their class standing. Guys at the mid to lower class standing at graduation usually had two choices remaining - - Infantry or Infantry.)

At Georgia dusk sometime that sweet summer, a very professional Infantry Captain led his

very professional battle-dressed grunts out in single file. They dropped down into prone firing positions in the red Georgia clay just yards from the bleachers, facing their weapons down range. They had all loaded up with red phosphorus tracer rounds for effect. Parenthetically, they only had about half of D Company's M-60 machineguns. Their unit patches, the blue shield with silver sword and words "Follow Me," were stitched on the left shoulders of their heavily starched olive drab fatigues.

After the Fort Benning officer at the podium discussed the TO&E basics of a rifle company, and pointed out the locations on the line of each type of weapon, a flare was fired and the Mad Minute commenced. Night had fallen.

A minute can be a short time or a long time, depending. This was a very long minute. The world had exploded, and the laser-like red tracers, although of relatively small caliber, literally ate the range and the simulated enemy. One hundred seventy or so dealers of death and destruction burned up the barrels of their weapons and lit up the evening sky with their essence.

A minute later, a second flare was fired and the well-disciplined company ceased fire. (I was never able to control *that* in the Republic known as South Vietnam). The eerie silence was only punctuated by the coughing from the crowd due to the acrid smoke and cordite. Despite the issue earplugs, our ears rang and our eyes tried to regain night vision and adjust on the smoldering target area. Multiple grass fires had sprung up. Had a real enemy been out there, there would have been lots of white flags frantically waving.

Until the construction of "The Monument To Stupidity" (Chapter 2), there was no comparison to this spectacle.

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Now, you know where this is all going.

On the fourth night, after a long and pleasant day of somewhat restrained revelry and attendant squandering of MPCs, we took heavy fire from eight or so automatic weapons from different points in the "friendly" town, all zeroed in pretty well on the fireports of the bunkers on that side of the island.

My entire CP group fell to the floor as a couple of green tracers streaked across the inside of our bunker. I crawled to the PRC 25 radio set on the Company frequency, and dragged it off the wooden shelf down onto the floor; it hit a guy right on the head on the way down, and I thought he was shot when he yelled and convulsed.

I depressed the handset, and ordered up one of those “Mad Minutes”!

It probably went somewhat over the minute, like maybe five minutes. It had to, because the 81mm mortar crews went through their entire ammo supply, dropping in the rounds in succession without even bothering to adjust fire, since they were in a totally unprotected position, and anyway could see that the rounds were exploding right on the town.

Eventually there was a tapering off of the rolling thunder, with occasional grenade explosions, some of which were mine. Remember, from the high ground at the entrance opening of the CP bunker, a good arm could just reach the fishing boats.

The rest of the evening was spent observing the locals putting out the many fires, and scrambling around the town yelling. You could say that the town was “on fire,” in fact, I think a few real firestorms were created, like a little Dresden. At first light, it was clear that all the fishing boats were sunk where they had docked, and even the intricate nets drying on racks were torn to shreds.

I got that old *sinking* feeling myself. Like the day the PRUs “got lost” and the night the mint-condition Huey became “second hand.” (Chapters 1 and ____). There would be hell to pay for this one, and maybe some Report of Survey action for the USAID pickup trucks and expensive farm machinery, especially considering the typical government “\$800.00-a-hammer” prices.

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An hour after dawn, and as expected, the Battalion net radio crackled. The locals seemed to have organized some sort of angry Asian mob on their side of the ferry dock (as confronted Steve McQueen in the “The Sand Pebbles” or was it “The Sand ‘Piper’”?) Anyway, the ferry itself didn’t look that good either. They were shouting in Vietnamese and “Engrish” and shaking their fists in the air.

The CP guys asked permission to let go some M-79 high explosive rounds to disburse the crowd, and I thought “why not?” I restricted their playful violence to the area of the concrete pavilion a few yards beyond the mob. A couple of well-placed rounds hit the concrete Buddhist shrine simultaneously, causing the crowd to break up and the irate protesters to run for cover like ants being swept into a dustbin.

By early afternoon, I had been alerted by a well-placed contact at Battalion to the arrival of a party (lynch mob) which was to include my Brigade Commander and some U.S. Embassy officials, who apparently were going to read me my Miranda rights and watch me beg for leniency under their Spanish Inquisition.

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I debated whether I should respectfully meet this “delegation” at the chopper pad down the hill at the big plywood Charlie Brown welcome sign (which had miraculously survived the evening) but thought, “What the hell, go out with dignity.” I decided to let them climb the steep hill and look for me where I belonged, in the command bunker taking care of business. On the other side of the coin, if the civilians had dress shoes, I would miss a few hilarious “slip and falls” on the way up the sandy slope.

When I heard the chopper blades grind to a halt, I got on the company radio and made small talk with the platoons, like I was really busy, and braced myself for the worst. After all, running up to the hostile group outside my bunker and saluting smartly wasn’t going to change a damn thing.

The first inside the bunker was my tall and imposing Brigade Commander, a full colonel. He himself had apparently been called in like a parent to the principal’s office because of his child’s misbehavior. I stood up and wish him good afternoon. He returned my salute, but rolled his eyes.

The two sweating State Department-type civilians remained outside, and when the colonel told me to step out of the bunker, it was clear that these guys had been totally mesmerized by the specter of the sunken fishing fleet. The older civilian already had me tried and found guilty, and to him all that remained was my sentencing and designation to the proper federal correctional facility. Neither bothered to introduce himself, and the younger one started in with gruff questioning.

My colonel butted right in and cut him off like a vicious defense attorney. Then he turned his whole body my way and calmly ordered, “Captain, explain *to me* what happened here.”

I told him that once I had determined that it was not in the best interest of my Company that the men be permitted to visit the town, and after throwing some local instigators off the island because they had abused their privileges, we were shot at from the village on two separate occasions. On the first, we restrained ourselves and didn’t even return fire (the truth); but the

night before we were, in my opinion, under very serious attack from automatic weapons spaced throughout the village, an attack obviously sanctioned by greedy townspeople, who were undoubtedly most sympathetic to the Viet Cong.

The colonel looked at the two sweating civilians and said in a tone which suggested finality, "Well, he returned fire."

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They were apparently totally disgusted with his attitude, and started heading for the chopper pad, shaking their heads in disbelief.

I saluted my boss again, and he smartly returned the salute; but ruined it all by again rolling his eyes.

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That was it. Another reprieve, with full clemency and restoration of my Civil Rights.

Needless to say, by nightfall we were yanked off LZ Charlie Brown and dumped deep in the nightmarish bush of the Republic of South Vietnam.

The Brigade Commander had sent four choppers, which had to land one at a time for picking up ten or so of us for each takeoff from the tiny pad, so there were four lifts of four in all. Hell, we didn't even have time to clean up our mess on the hill. Not to worry, the next unit would.

My CP group was on the very last bird, along with some mortars and baseplates, which were to be dropped off to my First Sergeant at the rear in Duc Pho.

Ostensibly, the colonel didn't want us *walking* through the town as we had when we arrived. I did notice that the smoldering ferry was still operational.

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As our overloaded bird struggled to climb up and away from the good life, guys on the east

side of the chopper with me, our feet planted on the skids, did their part to reduce liftoff weight by emptying their entire M-16 magazines into the plywood billboard, almost cutting off Charlie Brown's head and the welcome message.

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Almost twenty years later, I sat down to a business lunch with some attorneys and a Certified Public Accountant from Pennsylvania. The subject of Vietnam service came up, and the accountant boasted that he had served throughout the country as an Army Finance Corps auditor. When I mentioned that I was with the 11th Light Infantry Brigade, he exclaimed: "The 11th? You were with the 11th? I've heard of the 11th! Some assholes from 11th blew up this great little town in I Corps called Sa Hwyn!"

I thought for a moment, wanted to say something else, but simply responded: "No shit?"

end of chapter sixteen

