

CHAPTER 7: THE EXECUTION OF SERGEANT NGUYEN

I really don't remember his name, only his face.

I call him "Sgt. Nguyen." It seemed to me that every Vietnamese male, from the North or the South, had the name "Nguyen" (phonetic: "Nugen"), either first, middle, or surname. It went well beyond the English "Brown" or the Spanish "Fulano". (Although I really never knew anyone named "Brown"; or "Fulano".

So he probably had that name, Nguyen, and I am most probably correct in lending it to him. Sgt. Nguyen was our company's officially assigned interpreter from the South Vietnamese Army.

Sgt. Nguyen's problem was that he had a very big mouth.

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It came to pass that very soon after his arrival in my CP (Command Post - - the small contingent of command within an Infantry company not part of any Platoon), nobody liked him; and moreover, it came to pass that everybody hated him.

He consistently pissed people off with his loud bragging and self-aggrandizing. He stepped on lots of sensitive and very bellicose toes. He was obnoxious and overbearing, and in everybody's way. He had the social graces of a sick monkey, lacking in tact, even by Infantry standards.

His attitude and demeanor deviated from the norm for a young Asian man, who is typically polite and bowing profusely, even when he's about to stick a knife into your vitals.

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And I can assure you, the problem went well beyond any racial thing, which it was. While he was probably the only Asian in the company, virtually all races and ethnic groups hated his ass, across the board. Indeed, when his own mother assigned a code

word for prevention of pickup by a pervert on the way home from school, it was probably “candy”.

I wish I had called the Battalion Intelligence Officer and demanded that he be removed, except I would have had to provide a more cogent reason than: “We think he’s an asshole of the first water.”

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Had I a crystal ball, I could have at least tried to save him, with: “They’re going to kill him.” But it probably wouldn’t have helped. By the time somebody at Battalion “Intelligence” had hammered out a decision on that basis, he would have been history anyway.

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Aside from being transported by chopper, my Company was often picked up, dropped off, and even supported with (relatively) heavy firepower by a certain Mechanized Infantry Company, which consisted of a company of infantry with Armored Personnel Carriers (APC’s) as part of its Table of Organization and Equipment (TO&E). In other words, that unit had APC’s, and we didn’t.

APC’s were personnel transporters, but in Vietnam used like mini-tanks, full-tracked vehicles sporting a 50-caliber machine gun mounted in a rotating turret on top and an M-60 machine gun out the front. They were *designed* to carry ten or so Infantrymen inside, and to roar right up to the front line during conventional (WWII and Korean War - type) warfare, whereupon they would provide good fire support as the Infantry dismounted and made close contact with the enemy with their rifles, grenades and bayonets.

Of course, as was the case with a lot of Korean-War vintage iron in the Army’s inventory at the time. Vietnam had its own twist; and a lot of equipment had to be modified accordingly if it were to be of any use at all.

In the case of the APC’s, we grunts would not be expected to ride *inside* due to the high incidence of land mines throughout this sorry country. Group travel was tantamount

to riding across a “no-man’s land” of World War I: the area between the stationary rat-infested trenches, which had contained their own plethora of vulgar surprises.

And we did not appreciate surprises in Vietnam, either.

On the entire floor of the section designed for passengers inside, the “Mech” company had emplaced sandbags, at least three deep. The troops being transported, us, actually sat jam-packed up on the *roof*, with our weapons pointing outward and our heads slightly bowed in prayer.

Having the steel floor, sandbags and roof between us and the ground provided shrapnel protection from the millions of hidden “surprises” all over South Vietnam, which were in and around villages, under roads, and even under the water in the filthy rice paddies.

Even so, the explosions could be powerful enough to overturn the vehicle or even throw it a few feet into the air. Because of our perch on the roof, we had the chance of being blown off, clear of the flying shrapnel.

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To say nothing of the APC’s inherent vulnerability to the Soviet-made (and well distributed) “rocket propelled grenade” (RPG): a single fire, cone-shaped explosive, fired from a bazooka-type launcher, which could easily cut through both sides of an APC as if they were made of cheese, and make hamburger of everyone dumb enough to be inside. The deadly process is known as the “spalling” effect (spallation), where the armor plating itself also becomes lethal shrapnel and bounces around inside the vehicle off its own inner walls, and right *through* any flesh which might be in the way.

So the vehicle designed for transporting the Infantrymen to the actual front during a conventional battle, was being used by us basically as a *ride* and sometimes as a tank; but unfortunately without the necessary foot-thick armor of a full-fledged tank. It was, indeed, one war behind.

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The Mech company troops made up for their own inherent disadvantages and vulnerability by fostering understandable yet seething viciousness. They needed something in their favor while they were out there like sitting ducks for mines and

RPG's. Locals did not fool with them, for they had "an attitude".

In my area of operations, they virtually rolled right over bamboo hootches (huts - homes), people and farm construction whenever and wherever encountered; great billowing black smoke from the strong diesel engines rising over that which had been the fruit of indigenous agrarian labor.

More minds and hearts won in America's quest for same. The truth is that the Mech guys really were the true "Ugly Americans".

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Captain America was probably no different from the other Mech commanders in that respect.

We all called him "Captain America". Actually, he was a practically teen-age First Lieutenant commanding the Mechanized company assigned to us for transport and fire support from time to time. We all liked Captain America, a wiry redneck who always sported a faded and torn black Harley-Davidson T-shirt and a bright red helmet emblazoned with the blue and white stars and bars from whichever Southern state he had hailed. Although he could have been from New Jersey. The fact that he was certifiably insane is not relevant to this Chapter, but was decidedly in his favor for what he was paid to do.

Captain America was definitely considered a legend in his own time in our entire area of operations.

His painted pride and joy consisted of the same fiberglass commo-helmet that tank commanders wore, and through it's internal wiring he maintained radio communications with each of his fourteen or so APC commanders under his charge,

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and with me through my RTO's (Radio-Telephone Operators') PRC 25 (almost Stone-Age) radio by a simple flick of his frequency-band toggle switch.

We always referred to the Armored Personnel Carriers as the "Funny Wheels". My Battalion Commander would notify me by radio, "You're due for pickup by the Funny Wheels at 0530." (Another "secret code" ostensibly incapable of being broken by the

North Vietnamese or Viet Cong listeners. *Right*)

And Captain America had a funny little ritual, to which my superstitious troops (and I) subscribed early in our relationship. Superstitions ran rampant in the bush of South Vietnam.

That little ritual which kept you alive today should be repeated tomorrow, since it had *worked*

Hannibal would have his fourteen elephants in a row on a road, or in some sort of formation in a rice paddy or open area, and my men would clamber up on top and get set with clenched jaws for the bumpy ride across rice paddies similar to the challenge of a mechanical bull, or the hell-bent-for-leather roar down the Street Without Joy (Vietnam's Highway One.)

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I would always be on the lead APC sitting right behind Atilla, so he wouldn't have to take time to switch radio frequencies to speak to me, and thereby lose contact with his own people. I also felt safe when sitting next to a very, very lucky human being wearing a painted fiberglass helmet, with his whole life ahead of him.

Once situated, all would quiet down and prepare for his signal and the *ritual*.

By raising his arms, all drivers knew to spin their powerful diesels in unison and roar their smoking engines to life. Everyone would yell like crazy and get their frustrations and anxieties over the upcoming trip out of the way.

Honestly, it was a sight and experience to behold. (I guess you had to be there - - another feeling which probably today is considered a lot more than it really was.)

But it was amazing how little things like that could make one's day and provide some sort of meaning to life out there.

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A few days before our next unscheduled pickup by the Mech company, Laza reported to me that someone had searched Sgt. Nguyen's rucksack without his knowledge, *and found parts of a North Vietnamese Army (NVA) uniform* Initially, the significance was totally lost on me.

Now, a lot of guys had parts of NVA uniforms, enemy weapons, leather belts and even enemy ammo tucked away in the recesses of their own rucksacks. Like, to send home as souvenirs, but mainly to sell to the Rear Area Mother Fuckers on the fire bases we visited, so *they* would have some souvenirs to send home. (Confiscation of same from D and A Companies in Chapter 5's burned helicopter caper had saved me from the Report of Survey and maybe from becoming a "lifer".)

Perhaps Sgt. Nguyen intended to *sell* his stash the next time we spent time at a firebase. I certainly can't imagine a true *participant* in a civil war, which he *was* wanting souvenirs for *himself*. Like, some Confederate soldier taking a Yankee belt buckle home to Atlanta while on leave: "Look what I got!"

The company's consensus, by virtue of the find, apparently was that Sgt. Nguyen was either a spy or a turncoat, ready to run over to the other side in the case we were hit too hard or surrounded by the NVA one fine day.

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I never gave it much thought, but looking back, that cheap khaki cloth and flimsy pith helmet probably did Sgt. Nguyen in: the frosting on the cake, the last straw on the camel's back, etc...

Sgt. Nguyen apparently didn't know about the warrantless search of his belongings, and continued in his suicidal loud-mouth bragging and general diatribe over the next several days.

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On that ill-fated day, we were picked up on Highway One itself by Captain America and his band of criminals. They were waiting for us off the side of the Highway One pavement, permitting the local Vietnamese busses and motorbikes to buzz by without his unit's usual antagonistic interdiction, female body cavity searches and general harassment. My company had earlier waded in the morning heat across a vast rice-paddy

from the South China Sea side of the Redball (Highway One), toward the fatal pickup point.

The men clambered aboard, and Sgt. Nguyen took a seat on top rear center of our lead APC, his weapon facing to one side. I sat next to the *king*, as he did his *thing*: a lot of noise and acrid black smoke.

Off we flew after the Lieutenant's ritual, screaming due North on the paved road at top speed, the fourteen smoking diesel elephants all in a row, about ten meters apart. We were probably careening along at about forty miles per hour, but it seemed like eighty.

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But even at forty, If someone were to fall off in the path of those all-out APCs, absolutely nothing, nothing could save him from being rolled over by any and most all succeeding behemoths.

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So if one were to fall off the rear of the *first* vehicle, he would without a doubt be summarily rolled over as many as thirteen times by those speeding steel rhinos, each weighing many tons, not counting the sandbags and overweight sweating passengers. Mercifully, the victim couldn't possibly be alive after the first two or three, so it wouldn't make much difference that there wouldn't be a lot left for the sixth or seventh vehicle to mash.

That's why everybody topside always held on for dear life. Did I mention that Sgt. Nugent was sitting on the back of the lead vehicle?

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Now, you already know the rest of the story.

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Captain America gradually slowed his elephant down with a great grinding sound, and the rest followed suit. The big diesel engine ground itself to a smoking idle. The pimply-faced king turned about and yelled over his idling engine into my ear that someone had fallen off.

The irritated Lieutenant and I jumped off and we jogged together along Highway One towards to the rear of our nefarious convoy, as local motorbikes and busses made their way around us without demonstrating the slightest interest. *Rubbenecking is not really a Vietnamese trait.*

The last few vehicles were in the process of backing up and getting themselves into a hasty defensive posture off the pavement, as Captain America and I glanced behind each succeeding vehicle while working our way toward the rear.

Out of ground-in habit, we yelled to each topside little army to “unass!” the APCs and “get outta’ that cluster-fuck!” Some were even doing it on their own without the necessity of being reminded for the umpteenth time. Never cluster in the open, never.

At more or less elephant number eight, we found a good portion of the remains of Sergeant Nguyen.

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Now, we’ve all seen the movie “Ben-Hur”, some more than once, and I can assure you by understatement that there was a lot less left of our Sergeant Nguyen than Charlton Heston’s Roman nemesis after the chariots had rolled over him.

Captain America called for his APC, and it roared back to our location while somebody produced a black G.I. issue bodybag.

The King and I somehow got his parts into the bag, and a couple of my men carried it forward and slung it into the Lieutenant’s vehicle’s hold, while I washed off my hands in a mudpuddle.

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I didn't ask the Lieutenant whether he intended to report the incident or to merely dump the bag off somewhere; but it didn't much matter.

And what could he report? "The guy fell off and was run over." That's what I said on *my* radio.

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What was the probable result? The Sergeant's family would probably put in a claim for and collect his pay for a few months until he was written off in scratchy ballpoint ink in some now moldy South Vietnamese Army personnel logbook, which itself would be abandoned during the fall of Vietnam. Maybe turned into mulch or fodder for a communist mattress.

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Maybe he wasn't shoved and really *did* fall off. One thing was for sure: Highway One was truly a "*Street Without Joy*" for poor Sergeant Nguyen.

end of chapter seven

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