DEROS: A Philosophical Maturation in Vietnam

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

By

Zach Richardville

Thesis Advisor
Dr. Brent Blackwell

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Abstract

There may not be any event in American history that is so misunderstood as the Vietnam War. The many philosophies regarding American military intervention in Southwest Asia are quite different from each other. The desperate attempts of American leaders to justify a war fought by young, inexperienced soldiers in the wake of the cultural upheaval back home made for a volatile era in the United States. Even today, there are countless Americans that believe the Vietnam War is a black mark on our nation’s history.

The Honors curriculum at Ball State University offers an array of philosophical topics that challenge Honors students to think critically. The following story incorporates some of the philosophical elements that can be found in the Honors courses. It is the story of a young American who is drafted into selective service in the United States Army in Vietnam. DEROS follows the tribulations of its protagonist as he falls upon hard times and is forced to mature mentally and emotionally while serving overseas. The journey of the young American soldier examines philosophy while also shedding light on the mystery that is the Vietnam War.
Chapter 1

“Build me a son, O Lord, who will be strong enough to know when he is weak, and brave enough to face himself when he is afraid, one who will be proud and unbending in honest defeat, and humble and gentle in victory.”

- General Douglas MacArthur

Jack was laying bricks in Wichita when his holocaust came. The days started despicably early, possibly in an attempt to get to work before the sun could take notice of the specks below it and begin to beat them down. Sweat, dirt, and calloused hands were the themes. The blue collars liked the work well enough, using an ever-imminent smoke break to keep them distracted. It was clear to Jack that he did not belong, not only as a non-smoker, but especially as the young boy with only a temporary existence as a bricklayer. He had worked it out, laid out a plan with every bit of the precision needed to lay a foundation. After three years of seasonal work at the GM factory each winter, combined with summers of bricklaying each year, Jack could afford to pursue a Political Science degree at the University of Kansas.

Sometimes even foundations crumble. When this happens, the structural integrity and ambitious beauty of the building are irrelevancies. On June 12, 1967, Jack DeRonni’s skyscraper of aspiration came tumbling down. The wrecking ball was packed into a single piece of paper and mailed from Washington, D.C. It arrived amidst a short but neat stack of mail, hiding underneath two bills, one paper detailing changes in the terms of a contract owned by Mr. David DeRonni, and crudely atop a postcard from Giulia DeRonni in Chicago. Perhaps this letter had maneuvered to this position in the stack to deliver the most potent blow it could
create. David DeRonni thanked the postman and offered sentiments of staying cool in the brutal heat of a summer in Albion, Nebraska.

After needing no effort to conceal excitement about the bills, Mr. DeRonni eyed the crisp, official envelope from Washington, D.C. He had been following the news of the conflict in Vietnam, mostly because it affected his sale of produce, but his innocent mind fired a blank as he thought about what it could be. This blissful naivety lasted only a few seconds until he noticed the name that had been hurriedly printed on the envelope belonged to his son. He opened it with blistering haste, but at a glacial pace, the kind of feat made possible by the stoppage of time that enveloped his world. He pulled the neatly tri-folded paper from its envelope, noting the surprising weight of it in his hands. As he unfolded from the top down, the knockout punch that this particular letter had waited so patiently to deliver was administered to David DeRonni’s lower gut. The words sat smugly at the top of the page: “Selective Service System: ORDER TO REPORT FOR INDUCTION.”

Three hundred and thirty miles away, a phone rang in a coffee shop. A coffee pot was left unattended as the waitress embarked outside to find Mr. Ranpee.

“Mr. Ranpee?” the waitress inquired.

“That’s me,” replied a tall man with leathery skin, the appointed group leader of Jack’s brick laying team.

“Phone call for one of your boys.” Mr. Ranpee followed her inside the shop adjacent to the site. Shortly, he returned to the sun and hollered for none other than Jack DeRonni.
Jack picked up the phone excitedly because a phone call usually meant hearing from somebody back home, and often that a small amount of extra money was being sent from the DeRonni household. He was pleased to hear his father on the other end, and even managed to overlook the gravity in his voice initially. 

"Jackie, how are things up in Kansas?" Mr. DeRonni started out pleasantly.

"Hey dad," Jack began, "It's not so bad. The hours don't seem long until the end of the week." No smile from David DeRonni on the other end, but Jack didn't know that.

"That's good to hear, son." Mr. DeRonni paused. "Jackie, you need to come home tomorrow. I have arranged with Mr. Ranpee, and he has purchased a bus ticket from Ottawa on my behalf."

"Is everything alright?" Jack revisited his father's tone from the beginning of the conversation. "Is mom okay?" Mary DeRonni was a healthy woman, but was prone to stretches of severe infections that confined her to a small cot in Jack's sister's old bedroom. The doctor had suggested there was a significant deficiency in her immune system, so her stays on the cot were not taken lightly.

"Your mother is fine. She's over in Stillwell picking up feed, but she will be home when you arrive. Just be on that bus tomorrow." Mr. DeRonni's tone had not wavered from its businesslike inclination.

Jack hung up the phone, only then noticing his solitude in the coffee shop's kitchen, kept company only by the creaking of the overhead fan held together with rusted bronze and the smell of coffee that was burning in a hurry.
The bus departure was scheduled for 10:20 am the next day. Jack sat in the station, becoming aware of the battle being waged within his stomach. Small twinges of excitement to visit home flared up, only to be engulfed by the mysterious beast of worry that made its home in his lower gut. He trusted his father greatly, and had taken ample time since the phone call to realize that there was serious news coming his way that a phone call could not deliver. Jack boarded the bus at 9:56 am, the feelings of excitement occasionally bobbing on the surface inside him before they were fed into a trepidation that steadily gained strength.

The bus driver daydreamed of a Kansas City Royals championship banner, diverting attention away from his driving and stopping the bus abruptly. Jack slid forward in his seat, simultaneously jerking awake and making acquaintance with the dull pain on the right side of his neck. The absence of a pillow had not kept him from sleeping most of the ride, disallowing the feeling of worry to grow further. He swung his bag over his shoulder and stepped down onto the platform, scanning for two familiar faces.

"Jackie." To his right, Jack picked his mother and father out from a sparse crowd.

Jack hugged his mother and shook his father's hand, taking extra care to appreciate the smile tempting Mr. DeRonni's lips as he looked upon his son for the first time in weeks. The trio trekked to the parking lot, where Jack saw his father's 1964 Ford Mustang shimmering proudly in the sunlight. It reminded him of the ribbing his uncle Darryl had given him when the two had talked about cars a year earlier.
"You think this Mustang is a lady-killer, Jack, you just wait. Politicians don’t drive Mustangs. Hell, politicians don’t drive. They have people to drive them everywhere. The ride don’t matter nearly as much as the man inside it," he had ranted.

"What kind of car did FDR prefer?" Jack’s obsession with the great American leader was healthy.

"Oh, that Democrat bastard had a thing for the Plymouths, if I do remember correctly. But he couldn’t stick with one car any better than he could stick with one woman, the insatiable pig."

Jack knew his uncle’s bitterness toward FDR was only superficial. Darryl had sat with Jack for years, indulging the boy’s questions with what he remembered from the man’s long presidency. Darryl knew deep down that his reluctant admiration for that particular Democrat had a significant effect on little Jack’s political aspirations.

The reminiscent daydream of Uncle Darryl popped with the shutting of the car door. Jack sat in the back silently, and David DeRonni made conversation before long.

"I see the sun hasn’t cooked you through yet. I suppose you ought to thank me for that one, giving you such helpful chores growing up." Jack smirked as he recalled the grueling process of weeding the garden in the sun twice each summer. It had reinforced his work ethic in the very least.
Jack chatted with his parents for the lengthy drive back to Albion, and all three did a wonderful job of maintaining a worry-free façade. Such charlatans they were, and justifiably so, with such a heavy topic awaiting them on their front steps.

The Mustang purred its way across the gravel drive up to the house, resuming its usual spot next to the clapboards with faded yellow paint on the side of the house.

"Jackie, grab your mother's things and carry them inside, then meet us back on the porch. We've got some news for you."

Jack carried his mother's bags inside and returned promptly to the porch. He allowed his optimism from a pleasant car ride to take over until he sat alongside his mother on the porch swing, resting his hand on the beautiful finished wood of the armrest. He and his father had put the new swing together only a year ago.

The envelope extended from David DeRonni's hand snapped Jack's attention away from the swing's dazzling wood finish, and he pulled the paper out immediately. Like his father, Jack only needed to read the top two lines. His eyes crept reluctantly back above the paper to his father's solemn face. David DeRonni's kind wrinkles had become valleys. For the first time in his life, Jack's father looked old to him.

Mr. DeRonni struggled to speak.

"I guess I thought it would never be us," he finally released.

Jack immediately went into a mode of damage control. "Dad...I will be okay. There's a TV in the clubhouse at our new site, I've been watching Mr. Cronkite every
night. He says that the latest recruits are just pencil pushers in DC. We have increased strategy and decreased the number of troops overseas."

Jack’s parents wanted to believe what he had said even more than he did. Perhaps in the week that he was home before leaving for Fort Lewis, Washington, they entertained the possibility. News traveled quickly, and members of Jack’s family and friends stopped by to wish him well throughout the week. Alfred Dullandsworth, a talented pitcher who was headed to play ball at Louisiana Tech, had been Jack’s teammate and best friend in high school. He showed up with a six-pack of Pabst Blue Ribbon on the night before Jack’s departure. He tossed Jack a cold can, the drops from the condensation flipping onto Jack’s arm as it spiraled into his hands. Jack was hesitant, knowing that his mother would not approve of his drinking.

Alfred sensed his reservation and offered some crude encouragement. "Christ’s sake, Jack, you’re shipping to basic tomorrow. Far as I know, you’re an adult. Old enough to die for our country? Old enough to have a cold one in it."

Jack knew Alfred all too well to retort, and cracked the can while looking out over the hayfield in the front lawn.

"Here’s to you, Jackie boy. The best damn soldier America could ask for."

Jack tapped Alfred’s can with his own and tipped it back. As the frothy beverage slid down his throat, he thought again about Alfred’s philosophy. He was old enough to die for his country. He was not sure he wanted to.
Chapter 2

"We all came together, both young and old, to fight for our freedom, to stand and be bold."

- Corporal Aaron M. Gilbert, *The Marine*

The sun rose hot and angry on Jack's last day on his father's small farm. Jack twisted his way from under the sheets and placed his feet on the floor. His nostrils were greeted by the thick aroma of his father's bold coffee. David DeRonni had been up for hours. Jack wandered into the kitchen and saw his father's weathered fingers clutching the outer edges of a newspaper. Jack just had time to read the headline before the paper lowered to reveal his father's face – "Struggle for Mekong Delta Continues."

"Morning, Jack."

"Morning Dad." Jack exchanged his greeting for a freshly poured cup of coffee.

"Your mother is feeding the chickens and checking on the squash, and then it will be time to go."

Jack sipped his coffee silently. His mind had already boarded the train to Washington. A minute later, Mary DeRonni shuffled her way inside and sat down at the table. She stroked her son's hair and smiled at him.

"I have something for you," she broke the silence. Gingerly, she rose from her chair and disappeared into a spare room where the family stored gardening tools.
and old fabrics. Moments later she reappeared with a small piece of paper. She slid it across the table to Jack.

The watercolors were beautiful, and captured his childhood home in a way that no photograph ever could have. They worked together to bring out the warm hues of a Nebraska sunset, and the cool green captured the oak trees standing stoically in the front yard. The amber masses of the hayfield in the foreground tied it all together. Mrs. DeRonni was a talented painter.

Jack folded the small canvas sheet twice over and slid it into his pocket.

"Thanks, mom," he offered with a modest smile.

Jack's mind became a wayfarer during the ride to the station, wandering in an attempt to avoid real thoughts. These thoughts caught up with him as he found himself on the platform with his bag in hand. He hugged his mother while she gently placed her hand on the back of his neck.

"I better get a letter from my boy sooner than later," she spoke directly into his ear. Jack's optimism received a temporary infusion of strength as he imagined having a moment to sit down in the barracks and write home.

Mr. DeRonni was next. He extended his hand for a firm handshake and pulled his son in closer.

"I have watched you grow from a selfish boy to an ambitious young man. This may not have been part of the plan, but remember, there is a plan. This is not an end to the road as much as it is a turn in your route. Remember your faith and your family."
The goodbyes had been reserved to leave room for the hope that Jack’s return would be quick and glorious. Jack had even allowed himself a small fantasy about his title as a veteran and the respect it would garner in a political race. This fantasy was the extent of Jack’s forward thinking that day. As he sat down on the train with the canvas bag on his lap, he took another look out the window at his parents. The train began to move, but time remained stubbornly behind. There was nothing to Jack but this frozen moment, gazing upon his parents through a small pane of glass. They stood only a few hundred feet away, but with a few groans of the train’s forward lurching, they were already half a world away.

The train ride was approximately two days. To Jack, it was years. He slept fitfully during the nights and dozed off at odd hours during the day. He was, however, delighted by the meals. Too long he had eaten the melancholic foods afforded by his brick-laying wages. This food reminded him of his mother’s, which to Jack was the highest possible culinary honor. A savory roast beef with gravy wrestled with fresh snow peas for the attention of his palate. Another meal included a brilliantly glazed salmon with bread that had received a golden touch of honey and butter. Between meals and involuntary naps, Jack read sections of *The FDR Story*, catching up further on the musings and accomplishments of his favorite politician. He began to ponder how the man would have approached the civil rights issues that had grown steadily and domestically during the decade and the fragile global diplomacy of the time.

After two days, Jack sensed a general murmur among the passengers and noticed a suddenly increased restlessness within himself. Not long thereafter, the
train slowed to a halt in a crowded station, an ink spot of human existence on the beautiful landscape of the state of Washington. Jack filed out onto the platform with the other passengers, excited for his reunion with the concepts of privacy and personal space. Only then did he realize the abundance of young men appearing similar to him. Some of the young men walked with purpose in a particular direction, while others took in their new surroundings with eager eyes. Jack was one such wanderer with curious eyes, but he was quickly transformed to the former. He heard the authoritative bark of an impatient man, but could not make out individual words. He turned his glance to the direction of the sound, and saw a large sign bearing the instructions he did not even know he had been looking for. It read:

"United States Army: Selective Service Candidates – Report Here"

Jack walked over to a long white table that appeared to be under the jurisdiction of a small, plump woman. She spoke with a softness that contrasted nicely with the barking of the man, whom Jack now saw wore a US Army uniform. Upon her request, Jack showed his Driver’s License, then was instructed to board a Greyhound bus that loomed close by. It was going to be a quick ride to the barracks in Fort Lewis, and Basic Training was to begin the next morning. Jack stepped aboard and sat down next to a man with a disgruntled face and a hulking muscular build. Neither spoke during the ride.

The tedious check-in process upon arrival was the last time that Jack DeRonni existed. In just 72 hours, he would be reduced to a number. He would be broken down and faced with insurmountable tasks, then built back up from nothing. He would grow from an incapable file of information to an American soldier, but he
would never be Jack DeRonni again. Somewhere in the journey from bricklayer to Private First Class (PFC) DeRonni, a killer instinct was cultivated.

The day on which the transformation began was not a unique one. It promised heat and delivered with overwhelming satisfaction. His thick black hair was hastily expelled from his head, and clothes were shoved into his arms. He spent hours reviewing his personal history with military clerks. His measurements were taken as he passed through a human assembly line. Jack found himself a sheep walking among lions, terrified but eager to become stronger.

The days of Basic Training blended from the beginning, melting into masses that hardened into weeks. Through the fifth day, Jack had learned the basics of military first aid, and grueling stretches of pushups on three consecutive nights had inculcated how to care for his personal belongings. He had handled his first rifle, a brand new M14. The weapon fired in a three round burst and was courteous enough to pound his shoulder three times with each pull of the trigger. Jack had only fired a shotgun before back home. Sometimes his father had needed help keeping coyotes out of the chicken coop, so Jack had developed quite a feel for a twelve gauge. This gun, however, was different. It had range, and it had accuracy. Jack’s hands felt comfortable on his machine of war. They felt powerful.

Sometime near the end of the first week, Jack and his 47 new roommates were roused at 0500 hours as per usual and issued a sadistic promise.

“Physical combat tests today,” sneered second lieutenant Franklin McCord, a wiry man who was tougher than nails and far too bald for his 32 years.
"Shit." Jack heard the lamentation escape from a soldier to his right. He dared a glance and saw the disgruntled man from the bus. Dace Daniken was his name, Jack had learned. He knew nothing else of the man, whose demeanor did not exactly invite personal questions.

The first test involved feverishly crawling to a rope twenty yards away and back in an allotted time. Jack got down and dirty with his comrades and clawed his way to the rope. Mud flung into his face and stung his eyes, but it mattered little. Jack's focused retained an iron grip on the finish line, and he dragged himself across with his elbows. He stood, and his body remained upright while his spirit was shoved back into the dirt.

"Forty-two seconds," said a disgusted commanding officer. The required time was thirty.

The overhead bars were next. Jack's background as a high school athlete rejuvenated his confidence, and he deftly covered sixteen bars before dropping. The trouble with this was he needed twenty-four. Jack's mind began to frequently revisit the horror stories he had heard about men who were recycled and had to complete training again from day one.

So it went, most tests proving to be slightly too strenuous for the young boy from Nebraska. He had passed a couple, but was berated rather than recognized.

"Your platoon operates as a unit," the reminder came from a SSG Dexter Bradley. "If one of you sad sacks fails, your platoon has failed."

Jack finished the day with SSG Bradley's words ringing between his ears. Toward the end of the final test, the mile run, Jack heard groaning and wheezing
over his right shoulder. He turned to see his bunkmate, Dace Daniken, drop to a knee. Jack managed to squeeze his concern into the man’s string of profanity.

“Can you stand?”

“Can’t move my damned leg,” Dace grunted to accompany a sweeping gesture down his left thigh. He had straightened his leg to alleviate the pain of a sizeable cramp, and Jack could see the muscles stapled into a flexed position. Jack grabbed the man’s club of a forearm and draped it over his shoulder, then trotted the most excruciating quarter mile of his life.

Dace Daniken did not show to the mess hall a couple hours later. Jack did not see him again until it was late evening, as the soldiers were organizing their footlockers. Dace approached Jack, and a voice came from somewhere above the knees Jack saw in his peripheral vision.

“Had me in the nursery.” Dace scoffed at himself. “I was told the leg cramps were caused by severe dehydration.”

“Ah.” Jack chimed in.

Dace paused.

“I owe you one for covering my ass today. Name’s Dace.” He extended a hand the size of a bear paw to Jack.

“Jack.” The two shook hands and feigned that they had not known each other’s names before that moment.

The next seven weeks dragged by steadily, as the blank-faced teenagers did their best to become killing machines. In week three, the platoon ditched the M14 at the command of an unknown higher up, and began long days of training with the
semi-automatic M16. Each day of shooting was sandwiched between five-mile runs to and from the range. Jack finished near the back every time, running alongside his friend Dace. In week five, the workouts took an intellectual turn, as the men watched videos on topics ranging from military justice to the proper reaction to becoming a prisoner of war. These videos were followed by written tests, which Jack never found to be incredibly difficult.

Week seven brought about an exercise Jack had heard about, a live ammunition simulation that had earned the nickname “The Real Deal.” The men were placed in squads consisting of four members. Jack found himself with Dace, a skinny but brilliant boy named Lucas Croppar, and a friendly African American who referred to himself as “Abe.” The men were to complete a live combat simulation in the hills of the Washington countryside.

Ten minutes into the drill, Dace and Jack spotted their first targets, made to look like armed enemies taking cover behind rocks. Jack took aim with his M14 and riddled the shoulders of the black silhouette.

“One down, check your 10 o’clock!” Jack yelled as he popped his magazine out, brimming with satisfaction. “Croppar, on our six!” He felt like a real American soldier, and he felt damn proud.

Jack slid his weapon back up to his shoulder and slowly crept his eyes over the landscape before him. He saw a flash of metal near a group of salmonberry shrubs.

“Target, 12 o’clock,” he shared with Dace, and took aim with his rifle. Before he could pull the trigger, a deafening siren overtook the skies.
"Damn it, DeRonni! Daniken, Croppar, Miller, you’re all dead!" The abuse came from a megaphone.

Jack wheeled around, startled to find a simulation target not more than 50 feet from them, its mock gun pointed menacingly at them.

"Flanks covered at all times!" The megaphone impatiently pointed out the obvious.

Jack became hot with anger. He felt a twinge of embarrassment, easing into the hole left by his momentary arrogance. He thought he had been impressive, but his leadership had been ineffective. He turned to Lucas Croppar.

"And what the hell were you doing? I told you to stay on our six!" He began to take his anger out on the boy with thick, black-framed glasses.

To Jack's surprise, Croppar snapped back defensively.

"Who the hell cares? We're shooting at plastic targets and you think you've won the Medal of Honor! Besides, you looked right at the son of a bitch when you dropped for a reload!"

"Enough!" Dace's voice stopped the bickering.

Jack and Lucas glared at each other for a while before the megaphone cut back in.

"Return to the drill office for debriefing."

After more verbal abuse from commanding officers, the squad was sent back to the barracks.

"Don't worry about Croppar," Dace encouraged Jack aboard the bus back to the barracks. "I hear he's a rich boy from LA, daddy has a lot of connections. Heard
he thought about dodging when his daddy couldn’t pull the right strings to keep him out.”

Jack was not comforted. “He’s here just the same. He needs to have our backs if we’ve got his.” The rest of the ride was quiet.

Just when it seemed that basic training would never come to an end, the soldiers found themselves lining up to attempt their beloved physical combat tests again. First came the bars, and Jack’s confidence carried him through twenty-seven of them. Next came the crawl, and he again found success. Jack and his platoon had sweat and bled for seven weeks in the stale air of the training grounds, and it was showing. Each test was conquered as the camaraderie swelled within the platoon. Jack watched the sun set on his final day of training with a sense of accomplishment previously unmatched. The following day the men would receive their assignments. Jack had excelled in the basic language studies portion and had heard a nearby post in California was looking to enroll a few extra men in its defense language studies program. Only Lucas Croppar had scored higher on the cognitive and grammar exam, so Jack allowed himself some hope.

The graduation ceremony to conclude Basic Training was usually a celebration, but in the days of selective service, optimism was scantily present. Regardless, Jack beamed in his uniform as he stood next to Dace in the ranks. At the conclusion of the ceremony, a broad shouldered Captain with graying hair took the podium. He was Captain Gruden Wells, a man revered for completing three previous tours in Vietnam. Lore around the barracks maintained that his black hair had first started graying upon killing a Vietcong spy years earlier.
“Gentlemen, I congratulate you on behalf of the President of the United States and all the proud citizens whose freedom you have pledged to protect. Please report to the barracks for your assignment paperwork.”

Jack filed into the barracks with the rest of the platoon. His pride from the graduation ceremony was swept up in the tornado within his stomach as he considered the impossible for the first time. He reached a table and was handed an envelope by a small woman in uniform. He tore it open and removed a paper, expecting to see a paper with his name, information, and assignment on it. Instead he found himself staring at a generic set of orders addressed to dozens of names. Among them, he found DeRonni, Daniken, Croppar and Miller. The message read:

Order to Report for Duty

Combat Support

US Army Base, An Khe

September 8, 1967

Jack was going to Vietnam.
Chapter 3

"What difference does it make to the dead whether the destruction was wrought in the name of totalitarianism or the holy name of liberty or democracy?"

-Mahatma Gandhi

A new theme park had recently been built in Omaha, Nebraska. It featured a ride called "Devil's Drop," where patrons' seats were lifted seven hundred feet in the air and dropped six hundred until the hydraulic brakes kicked in. As Jack stood there staring blankly at his assignment paper work, he found himself sitting atop the formidable ride. For all he knew, he was falling alone through the Nebraska sky, far away from a stale US Army office in Washington. He had come so far, and had beaten back the overwhelming fear within him. For nine weeks he had drowned the feelings of uncertainty and terror, but now it was he who was drowning.

Three states away, David DeRonni sat down with the morning's newspaper. He began to open it in his customary search for the weather forecast on page two, but a headline stopped him dead in his tracks. He closed the paper and took it in with his tired eyes. On the front page, in bold writing, the paper played cruelly with Mr. DeRonni's imagination:

"More Americans to Vietnam: Westmoreland Requests Another 200,000 troops"

Mr. DeRonni was expecting to hear of his sons' assignment later in the week, but his anxiety demanded it now. Although he knew better, he tried to reach his son
via telephone at Fort Lewis. He was pleasantly surprised to be given an update on Jack.

"Private First Class DeRonni has completed training and is no longer at this facility," a woman with a hardened voice had told him through the phone. David DeRonni imagined she might have been one of the people tasked with delivering the news of a soldier's death to a commanding officer.

Mr. DeRonni hesitated then asked the only logical question in his mind.

"Where is he now?"

"He has been given one week's leave," the woman's voice grew impatient.

"Thank you." David knew not to push his luck any further. He knew Jack would be home within a couple days.

Jack boarded the train for the long ride back to Nebraska. He was numb and his thoughts were cloudy. The train ride was fleeting and insignificant to him. He could not taste the extravagant food that appeared before him. Soon enough, he had arrived at a place that did not feel like home. He stepped off the train and scanned the crowd for his parents like he had done nine weeks earlier. He found their anxious but enthusiastic faces straight ahead. Upon seeing them, his eyes urged him to open the floodgates as the tears stood in wait. Instead, he reminded himself that he was now an American soldier, and his jaw became iron in his cheeks as he approached them.

Jack could not wait, and told them immediately of his assignment. His parents received the news without emotion, and the three stood in silence for quite a while.

It was the wisdom of David DeRonni that found words first.
"You have made me proud. You will make your country proud."

The DeRonni family rode home as Jack’s parents distracted themselves with questions about basic training. Jack indulged them with his stories, telling them about the physical tests, the living quarters, and his new brethren, including Dace. Jack began to feel more comfortable as he supped that night at the farm, enjoying braised beef and a summer vegetable medley from Mary DeRonni’s own garden. He went to bed with the weight of the world on his soldiers, only hoping that he would feel lighter when the sun came back up.

Jack found himself awake before the sun, unable to sleep any longer from eight weeks of early morning workouts. He helped his father with the morning chores around the barn and departed a few minutes early to begin the preparation of coffee. This became his morning routine for the next week, and he spent the days reading up on the struggles of the United States military overseas. Finally, the sun rose again to see him off.

This time it was different. Jack said goodbye to his parents with an uninvited sense of finality, and it terrified him. His mother offered encouragement as they parted ways.

"God is on your side, Jackie. I will be writing you every Sunday. You may even be home for Christmas." The sense of finality waned under the influence of his mother’s calming voice.

Rather than hugging his mother and shaking his father’s hand, Jack pulled them both in together for an embrace he wished lasted forever. Over Mr. DeRonni’s shoulder, something caught Jack’s eye. A rectangle of canvas atop an iron pole
waved only slightly, but it was unmistakably waving at Jack. As he walked away from his parents and into the Lincoln airport, Jack looked only quickly at them and then spared himself of their somber stares. He looked once more over his shoulder at the object that had caught his attention before. The red, white and blue danced proudly and beautifully for one of her sons. Jack boarded the plane with an invincible self-regard. He was going to fight for his country, an honor that some men only dreamed of.

Four days later, the Vietnamese countryside came into view for the first time. Growing up a farmer on the Great Plains of the United States, Jack thought he had seen green before. He was astounded by the unending jungle beneath him. Different shades of green were plastered to the landscape and all of its contours. The beauty of the mountainsides temporarily distracted him from his terror. Inaudible things were exchanged over the radio, and Jack returned to reality as the plane took him for a closer look at the Vietnamese vegetation. All too soon, the craft’s wheels kissed the grass landing strip. Moments later, PFC DeRonni and the rest of the platoon put their boots on the ground for the first time outside An Khe, South Vietnam.

The new soldiers were taken first to a debriefing meeting in an enormous green tent and directed to sit on wooden benches. It was here that Jack first caught a glimpse of his Captain, Stewart Hull. CPT Hull’s reputation preceded him in most places, but these soldiers were fresh off a plane from Georgia and had never had the pleasure of his company.

“Alright, movie stars, listen up. You are now part of the real deal,” CPT Hull began. Jack thought about his squad’s failure in the basic training version of “The
Real Deal," and a lump the size of a cue ball formed in his throat. He tried to swallow, but his throat was dry.

"We are a large unit most often tasked with security sweeps of the city of An Khe. We have cleared the NVA presence from the city, but those Vietcong bastards have been at us for weeks and are gaining ground. Believe it or not, President Johnson prefers not to blow this particular city off the map. If we can keep the VC out for a few more weeks, General Westmoreland will have another foothold in his northbound progression. Your platoon will be split into three groups of eight and will be combined with eight other soldiers for each security run. These eight other soldiers have been here longer than you. You do what they say, when they say it. Understood?"

Although the question was rhetorical, a chorus returned from the platoon.

"Sir, yes sir."

"Good." Hull continued. "Your groups have been predetermined. See SSG Sherman outside for your assignment."

SSG Sherman was a tall man who had a few white hairs protesting their eviction on the back of his head. He wore aviator sunglasses that sat comfortably below his sweat-soaked forehead. He stood next to a small chalkboard with three columns that each contained eight names. PFC DeRonni was listed in the second column, along with PFC Daniken and PFC Cropar. PFC Miller was listed in the first column. SSG Sherman smoothly explained the future plans to the platoon.

"First group will be headed out at 1400 hours to the city to visit our friends and will be back by sundown. Men from the 143rd airborne division will be joining
you. They have been doing these sweeps for weeks, so direct questions to them. This second group will be on security patrols for the night with soldiers from C company. Same deal – if you open your mouth, it better be a relevant question.”

With an unusually busy afternoon, Jack took some time to become familiar with the base. The majority of the camp had been constructed in a field of tall grass on the edge of the jungle. There were several green, canvas tents in which debriefing meetings were held. A small, but cleanly cut trench had been dug on the south side of the camp facing the open grass. On its bank rested a .50 caliber machine gun, eager to greet any hostile visitors from the tree line across the field. On the East side of the base stood a few abandoned Vietnamese bungalows with straw roofs. Just beyond them, makeshift barbed wire fencing marked the edge of the camp, and Jack had learned that not quite a mile further east led into rural rice paddies.

Most of the time, the troops exited the base to the east. It had been made extremely clear to Jack that exiting camp to the north was suicide. The jungle clutched the northern edge of the camp; it provided the cover needed should Vietnamese forces decide to make a move on the base. It was also the most direct route to An Khe, and the NVA had initially made an effort to make the jungle an impasse for American forces. For these reasons, the jungle was laden with lethal traps constructed by both the Vietnamese and American militaries. Crude Punji traps lay in wait just beyond the deadly web of American landmines.

Hours passed, and the base was mostly calm. The radios chirped constantly while the team made its way through An Khe, which kept everybody a little tense.
Jack was not close enough to the command tent to hear everything, but he was able to pick up short phrases coming from the security team.

"Friendly intel claims no VC sightings in last twenty four hours."

"Two clicks north from center of city, no movement."

"Woman here says her son disappeared two days ago, suspects VC."

Jack was sitting on a wooden bench outside a smaller tent when Dace sat down across from him.

"How you holding up?" he asked.

"Not bad," Jack lied over his nerves. "Glad we aren't the first guys going out there." At least the second statement was true.

"I been talking with one of the fellas from C, a Sergeant First Class (SFC) Weller. He told me the deal on CPT Crow."

"Crow?" Jack was just beginning to pick up the slang terms around the base.

"CPT Hull. They call him Crow because he blacks his face out when he's in a hot zone. Says he's been around since this war began and he's seen only a handful of his men killed. He was a coon hunter back in Georgia, and he can kill a man without a sound. Not a man of remorse, but he cares about the safety of his soldiers. We're in good hands."

Jack stared at the ground. He felt more comfortable knowing a little bit about his captain. Comfort, however, is much different than relaxation. Jack knew he was in the wrong place to ever consider relaxing. A moment later, he found a way to keep his mind busy. He remembered Dace saying he was from West Virginia.
“And what about you? If you weren’t here... If you were back in West Virginia...” Jack began. He felt almost guilty considering the possibilities forfeited by the war. He knew he was fighting for his country, and he was doing the right thing. He was an American instrument of peace and the preservation of freedom. What he could not understand was why freedom meant an ambitious boy from Nebraska and a kind-hearted young man from the hills of West Virginia had to sit on the edge of a jungle in Southeast Asia.

“Coal mining.” Dace brought Jack back from his wandering thoughts. “I was a third generation miner, a Daniken tradition,” Dace continued with a slight chuckle.

“Ah. We aren’t so different after all. My granddaddy was a miner.” Jack thought about his grandfather, Giacamo DeRonni. He had emigrated from a large city in Italy to the Eastern Oklahoma countryside for what seemed like a promising opportunity for work in a blossoming coal-mining craze. After living in the depths of the mines for some years, the mining work had waned, forcing Giacamo south to Nebraska. There he had opened a grocery store on the outskirts of Jack’s hometown specializing in fresh vegetables. If it weren’t for the success of his grandfather’s store, Jack might very well be a third generation laborer himself.

The conversation between Jack and Dace was interrupted by a stir in the camp. The security patrol had returned from An Khe. Jack and Dace made their way to the largest tent for any updates the patrol team may have for the rest of the units. They made their way in and stood along one of the canvas walls. The chairs were reserved for the soldiers who had been in the city for the day. The chairs filled up
with a healthy lot of American killing machines. Jack had not heard of any contact with hostile forces from the day’s patrol.

First Lieutenant (1LT) Danny Hampton stood at the request of CPT Crow to give a summary of the tour.

“Quiet pass today,” 1LT Hampton announced. “No sighting of VC in the last three days, but not being seen is exactly what they’re good at. The citizens are getting restless, and we are concerned that more VC sympathizers have appeared. PFC Yubbs discovered a rat tunnel opening on the inside of one house on the South side of town. The tunnel was barricaded and collapsed. Sir.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant Hampton. You may be seated.” There was gravity in Crow’s voice. “At this time, it is advised that we no longer trust any citizen sources in An Khe. The VC are present, and reports otherwise by citizens are exactly what they want us to hear. Tomorrow, patrol unit two will take special care to check for tunnels in or around civilian homes. Communication and coverage from all sides are essential. The VC are due for another appearance. Are there any questions?”

No hands were raised. The mood was somber, and the soldiers were ready to sleep. Jack and Dace squeezed out of the tent with the flow of soldiers. They gathered up their weapons and equipment and returned to the tent for a meeting before the guard was set for the evening. Jack was assigned to the Eastern edge of camp, where external threats and artillery support were least needed. This made him uneasy. He was paired with a thin but muscular soldier named Jules Weber, who was equipped with a M40 sniper rifle. Jack had learned that PFC Weber had received four additional weeks of training to earn the title of designated marksman.
within the unit. An experienced soldier with an exceptional shot as a partner made
Jack feel slightly better.

Jack sat with his back against one bungalow in the dark, occasionally looking
through binoculars into the sparse vegetation far past the barbed wire. His
binoculars were outfitted with night vision lenses, which engulfed the scene before
him in a light green fire. PFC Weber rotated between an identical pair of binoculars
and his riflescope with thermal capability. The two also referred frequently to a
motion sensing radar that swept the flatlands in front of them. Conversation was
kept at a minimum to retain focus, and the four hours passed slowly. Jack had never
been so happy to be bored. The two soldiers were relieved as the guard was
changed, and Jack found his way to a cot in one of the large tents. He took his boots
off and sunk into the foldout cot, suddenly becoming aware of the sweat that had
soaked his shirt and the thickness of the air. He closed his eyes in a futile attempt to
do anything resembling sleep. Tomorrow, he was going into enemy territory for the
first time.
Chapter 4

"You may kill ten of us, we may kill one of you; but in the end, you will tire of it first."

-Ho Chi Minh

Jack eventually slipped warmly across the threshold of sleep. He woke frequently, opening his eyes to nothing but darkness and dead silence around him. He only heard the sounds of giant mosquitoes delightfully making their rounds within the tents. The terror of the night on the edge of a Vietnamese jungle was less desirable than rolling back and forth in a pool of his own sweat on the cot, so Jack went back to sleep. After a little less than six hours, Jack was roused at 0800 hours.

Breakfast was a luxury the soldiers left behind in the States, so Jack ignored the growling of his stomach as he parted the tent doors to step into the heat of the sun. CPT Crow had decided that his unit should learn how to properly reload an M60 machine gun should one of them have to carry it rather than his M16. At least one soldier in each unit was required to carry an M60 machine gun as well as extra fragmentation grenades and tools. The lucky soldier who was stuck with this significantly heavier equipment was usually nicknamed the “engineer” of the unit. Jack’s morning was spent simultaneously learning how to – and hoping he never needed to - use an M60.

After being refreshed in the use of the heavy artillery, the soldiers were given time to eat lunch. Jack was handed an MRE.

“Beans and dicks. The usual.”

“Thanks.” Jack’s lack of enthusiasm had no effect on the issuer of the rations.
After choking down his lunch, Jack geared up and headed for the command tent. His unit was going to leave earlier for the security sweep than the previous day. This was both because of the extensive checks for tunnels the unit would perform, and it was common practice to travel to the city at inconsistent times in the day. If the enemy learned the planned location and time of an American military unit’s visit, an ambush was nearly guaranteed.

CPT Crow refreshed the unit on the objectives of the security sweep and emphasized again the paramount important of awareness and caution. The unit exited the tent silently and finished equipping. Jack checked to confirm the safety on his M16 was on, then slung the weapon over his shoulder. He fell in the ranks next to Dace, and the unit exited the Western side of the base. The previous day, Unit 1 had exited on the East side. The routes to An Khe were also varied to avoid a routine that could be anticipated by the enemy.

The city was slightly less than two miles to the north of the base, but the route the American forces took bowed out a little more than a half mile through the jungle. The advantage to this was the path was a secluded line through the jungle that was relatively certain to be outside the range of Vietcong scouts or spies. Some men in the unit carried motion sensing radars and heat signature detectors for added insurance. The combat veterans peppered throughout the unit talked freely as their boots trod upon the twisted, overgrown terrain below them. Most of the green soldiers buried their terror in silence.

Jack trudged along near the middle of the unit and concentrated on the snapping of sticks below him. He had reason to believe that this trail was safe, but
the louder snaps beneath him stopped his heart nonetheless. He had heard all too many stories of soldiers who, after one step just like the other thousands he had taken, found himself falling helplessly toward crudely sharpened bamboo stakes and a gruesome death. A thorough layer of sweat formed on Jack’s body as the thick humidity of the jungle crept beneath his shirt.

Jack’s cruel daydreams were pushed out of his mind by the voice of Second Lieutenant Jaime Bell.

“Hold,” he said, showing the back of his right hand to the unit behind him. His eyes were on the sky. Conversation throughout the unit had ceased. Suddenly, he dropped to the ground. “Down! On your belly, do not move!” He hissed the commands hoarsely, reluctant to yell because of the unit’s proximity to the city.

Jack dropped to the jungle floor with the rest of the unit and lay petrified on the lightly trodden path. He spent a couple motionless minutes becoming frustrated with the volume of his breath. 2LT Bell stood slowly, then gestured with his right hand for the rest of the unit to do the same. Jack took his right hand from the trigger guard on his weapon and propped himself up before standing.

“Possibly a spy plane. Not ours.” Bell explained. Jack knew that reconnaissance aircraft often detected enemies with motion sensing capabilities. It now made sense to hit the ground despite being very well hidden under the jungle canopy. “We’re half a mile out,” Bell continued. “No more talking.”

Ten minutes later, the unit marched through a thinning tree line to a giant clearing that was the Western city limits of An Khe.
“Weapons free,” Bell growled backwards. “Do not engage without my command, unless fired upon.”

The soldiers in the back of the unit began walking sideways, eyes on the flanks of the group. As the squad moved through the village, Jack squinted in the sunlight, taking in the scene in front of him. The village was constructed with near symmetry, with small bamboo huts and straw roofs aligned in what could have been considered a pentagon. A watchtower stood proudly in the Northwest corner, complemented by a crude bamboo ladder stretching to its summit. The city was on uneven ground, sloping very slightly toward the southeast. Thick wooden rods elevated all the buildings on the Eastern side, with staircases wrapped around their outsides and terminating at the doorways. Jack had only seen this practice before on a beach in Texas, employed there to avoid flood damage to the homes.

Dirt paths connected each hut, trodden by various Vietnamese men and women who hustled about the village. Most of them seemed unperturbed by the presence of the American soldiers at first, only glancing toward them before continuing on their way. A few of them, especially the younger citizens, pointed and frantically spoke to those around them upon noticing the troops. After fifty tense minutes of checking the city perimeter, the unit regrouped in the southeast corner of city.

“Perimeter appears secure,” Bell spoke back to camp through the radio. “Moving to residential now.” He lowered the radio microphone and spoke to the unit. “Rear half begin here and move clockwise. We’ll start one unit North and work
the opposite direction. Move quickly, and make note of any rat tunnels for collapse.
We don't want to be here any later than we need to.”

Jack was just behind the middle of the unit, so he grouped with the rear half and entered the first hut. Each group of soldiers had a Vietnamese translator to keep citizens calm and informed. He was not necessary in the first hut, which was empty. One soldier scratched the hut on a primitive map of the city and the group continued to the next hut. In it they found an elderly man on a cot who did not seem surprised to see them. Expecting them or not, he made it clear that the soldiers were not welcome, as he began to point and shout in Vietnamese. The translator went to work quickly to appease the man and thank him for his cooperation. The group filed back outside, less than enthusiastic about their reception in the last hut.

Jack took only three steps off the porch of the hut when the crack of a rifle split the sky in two. Jack heard a sickening thud a few feet in front of him, then a groan that was barely audible. PFC Daniken slumped to the ground and began frantically clutching for the trigger guard of his M16.

“Contact!” The word spilled out of Dace’s mouth with a generous amount of blood. “Taking fire!” He screamed through the blur of pain into a blinding sky that matched the electric blue of a flame.

Another rifle crack, followed by a third a few seconds later. Another soldier hit the ground, both hands clutching a hole in his thigh that began to spurt blood.

“The rooftops!” The maniacal scream of 2LT Bell reached them from about five huts over. “They’re on the rooftops! Engage!” He began to pour bullets into the straw atop the huts.
Jack wanted to move, but he couldn't. His body was frozen in the path and his eyes were frozen on a straw rooftop across the small center of the city. Right before him, a piece of the straw rooftop rolled over then rose quickly to a crouched position, taking the shape of a human body. The human mass of straw took aim with a large weapon that gleamed in the sun and prepared to fire in Jack's direction. He was not going to wait to see if they hit their mark, because that mark was likely him.

"Cover!" Jack implored the other members of his squad. He took two steps and dove back into the hut he had just left.

Bullets ripped through the porch and bamboo siding as Jack scrambled across the floor. The old man was absolutely hysterical, struggling to stand while screaming incomprehensively at Jack. Two other soldiers had followed him in, and they quickly hurdled the minimal furniture to further hide and protect themselves. Jack flipped the old man's cot on its side and braced himself against the back wall on the other side of it. The bullets continued outside, but no longer tore at the man's hut. Jack ignored the berating dished to him from the old man, looked at him and smacked the floor with his left hand.

"Down," Jack commanded him while pointing at the floor. The gesture was effective, and the man sunk to the floor, defeated but still irate.

The gunfire had slowed down outside, replaced by the shouting of the American soldiers. Jack snaked his way from behind the bed to the window, through which he could see 2LT Bell standing in the center of town.

"Hit the rest of the rooftops!" He barked at the soldiers surrounding him, who promptly pumped more bullets toward the tops of the huts. Jack slowly made his
way to the doorway of the hut, still half covered by the frame. He positioned his weapon at his shoulder, ready to shoot, and began scanning the rooftops. He focused on the straw flying up from a building on the south side of the city as a soldier scoured it with his M16. Suddenly, like he had seen moments earlier, a portion of the straw began rolling toward the edge of the roof.

“Tango, south side rooftop!” Jack announced and took aim.

Jack’s M16 pounded his shoulder as he pulled the trigger. The figure atop the roof shuddered, and a small patch of the straw was painted red. The straw soldier dropped from the roof as Jack put a couple rounds just over his head. He clutched his leg and scampered madly for the edge of the jungle. Jack crawled up his back with the iron sights of his weapon, but before he could fire again, another sound pierced the sky. It was a sharper, quieter crack that came from PFC Weber’s sniper rifle. Through his gun sights, Jack watched the bullet meet the back of his enemy and carry his top half forward to the ground, followed by the lifeless flailing of his legs.

“DeRonni, Shea, confirm that kill!” At 2LT Bell’s command, Jack and PFC Daniel Shea charged the body on the ground, rifles pointed and ready.

They arrived at the body, which had hit the ground hard and slid into a tangled mess. One arm lay stretched out in front, the other extended over his head. Neither hand clutched his weapon, which lay a safe distance ahead of him on the jungle’s edge. A clean hole bore through the straw affixed to his upper back, from which a slow stream of blood trickled to the ground. PFC Shea put his boot on the man’s shoulder and rolled him over. The two Americans looked upon death personified, examining the man’s face. Two glassy, slightly open eyes stared emptily
at the sky, sitting comfortably in the middle of a small brown face. Jack looked down upon him with his mouth open.

"Vietcong," Jack tried to say it, but his lips would not move. He felt a chill crawl up his spine. The diminutive dark-skinned man was dead because of Jack. His family would never see him again. A tightness gripped Jack's chest. He tried to take control of his emotions, he reasoned with himself. If he had not done this, there was no telling who would never have made it home.

"Confirmed!" PFC Shea yelled back to the unit.

The two walked back to the center of the city where most of the unit had gathered. Jack became confused when 2LT Bell was not present. Uneasiness took over as he considered the thought that there were still enemies watching. The uneasiness quickly gave way to a realization that hit Jack's gut like a cannonball. He jogged back towards the West side of town and found 2LT Bell exactly where he thought he would. He was crouched over Dace's stone body, frantically finishing his radio communication.

"Three wounded. Medical evac requested immediately. One enemy KIA. Over." Bell looked stoically at Jack after delivering his summary. "Breathing, but unresponsive," he clued Jack in. "His lung is likely punctured."


Jack could not control himself, and looked down at his fallen comrade. Dace's eyes were shut loosely. His mouth was held open by cracked lips bloodstained with a brilliant red. Dried blood caked his chin, and a menacing red spot grew very slowly
in the middle of his shirt. If it weren’t for the broken rising and falling of his chest every couple moments, he could have been mistaken for dead. Jack felt a bowling ball forming in his throat. He could not tear his gaze away from his brother on the ground. He tried to think of home, but at that very moment, Nebraska had never seemed farther away.
Chapter 5

"I ain't got no quarrel with them Viet Cong. No Viet Cong ever called me nigger."

-Muhammad Ali

The soldiers tended to the wounded for the few minutes before the helicopter soared over the top of the jungle. A tourniquet was applied to the leg of PFC Conner, and a rough splint and bandage were fashioned to treat PFC St. Martin's left arm. The tree line joined the rooftops of the huts in a uniform shudder as the chopper blades bore down on them. The Huey had just enough room to land in the center of town, and two soldiers hopped off with a stretcher for Dace. An invincible American soldier had been broken, and Jack watched his body bob with the footsteps of the men who carried him.

The wounded were loaded aboard the helicopter, and it took to the sky. It did not turn back towards the south from where it came, but dipped westward and floated quickly out of sight.

"PVTs St. Martin, Daniken and Conner will be treated at Qui Nhon military hospital. The rest of us are to return to base. Cover our six and make sure we are not followed." Bell gave the instructions, and the unit fell into its ranks and made for the jungle.

As the Americans disappeared into the tree line, a few Vietnamese citizens had just begun to gather around the corpse of the straw-clad VC fighter. The walk back to base was silent. Jack walked with four others, but felt alone. He wanted to be proud of his ability to stay cool and collected during the attack, but three wounded
companions was nothing to be proud of. The image of Dace's body and the blood-soaked dirt around it burned in his mind. The torturous image did not last, but gave way to a greater, unrelenting terror.

Jack began to replay the events of the attack in his mind. The still, sunny day was shattered by the crack of a hidden rifle. Jack thought hard about the shack in which he took cover. It was riddled with bullet holes as he clamored behind the bed. Bullets tore through the building in search of Jack DeRonni himself. For the first time, it sunk in that somebody only a few hundred feet away had wanted him dead, and had done their best to make it happen. What grabbed his imagination most was that this person who wanted him dead was completely unseen for so long. Jack wondered how long the VC had watched the unit walk through the city. He had felt safe walking out of the hut when he was in grave danger, and this made his skin crawl.

A far more disturbing thought pushed the recollection of the attack from Jack’s mind. He did not know how long the VC had waited for the Americans or watched them in the city, but this bothered him little in comparison to this new idea. Dace was three feet in front of Jack when he was shot. He was undoubtedly the target of the VC marksman. Three feet and an arbitrary selection separated that bullet from Jack's ribs and put it into Dace's. There was no explanation for why Dace was clinging to life on a helicopter and Jack was healthy and back at the base. His body began to pulse with an involuntary guilt that ate at him through the debriefing meeting.
The debriefing meeting was short and pessimistic. CPT Crow was visibly frustrated but issued no suggestions of fault. The decision had been made that there would be no security sweep the following day and that additional marksmen were to cover the soldiers from the watchtower on the next trip. The soldiers were defeated and to repair morale, Crow notified them that the next day would be taken to rest. With the larger numbers of soldiers around the base, sentries during the night were increased from two to three. Jack was assigned again to the East side with PFC Weber, but would be joined by PFC Croppar, who had been placed in the third security sweep unit and had yet to pick his weapon up or leave the base.

Jack expected it would be hard to get to sleep, but his exhaustion from the day proved helpful in that regard. In his sleep, he found no refuge from the torment of his mind. He dreamt that he was back in the village. Again, he watched the Vietcong fighter reveal himself and brandish a weapon in his direction. He saw it but still did not believe. The straw roof itself had come to life. A killer had spawned from an inanimate object and focused on Jack. The muzzle flashed from the rooftop and Jack’s chest opened up as the bullets reached him with lethal precision. Jack’s arms flailed and his legs jolted him from his sleep. He lay awake on his cot, his shirt soaked through with sweat. The killer was gone, but the suffocating darkness of the night was no relief.

Eventually, the heat-induced coma that the soldiers regarded as sleep returned long enough for Jack to make it to dawn. He was so grateful for the sun’s rescue from his nightmares that he did not mind the morning heat. He was ravaged from his lack of an appetite at dinner the previous evening and devoured the hard
biscuits handed to him by the rations officer. He longed for more, but knew a full stomach in Vietnam was an absurd fantasy. After downing a small jug of water to accompany his meager breakfast, Jack returned to his cot in the tent.

Jack looked forward to the day of rest, but the time to be alone with his thoughts worried him. The only things on the schedule before his night watch were a meeting at 1100 hours and an equipment and weapons inspection in the afternoon. He decided to busy himself with acquiring the necessary materials to write a letter home to his parents. He ventured over to the central command tent and found the mail clerk inside. A man with thick, black eyebrows sat hunched over a table but noticed Jack's shadow almost immediately.

"Mail's still a few days out," the man said offhandedly while barely glancing up. He started to scribble something on a paper. "I can check the unclaimed letters though. Name?"

Jack was caught off guard. "Oh, uh, DeRonni," he spat out. Having only been there three days, Jack knew there was no chance he had any mail. The man's hefty brow furrowed as he sifted through a stack of envelopes to his left.

"DeRonni," he repeated. "Nope." His conclusive announcement offered no sympathy.

"I'm actually looking to write home," Jack finally managed.

"The hell didn't you say so?" The clerk reached below the table into a box of white paper and handed a couple sheets to Jack. He then grabbed a morose, battered pencil without an eraser and set it on the desk. "I'll need the pencil back."
Jack thanked him and exited the tent uncomfortably. He traversed the base back to the tent that housed the soldiers, which also had tables along one wall. He sat down and stared at the paper. Figuring out what to write did not take long. He composed his story up to the point of the visit to the village. He wrote colorfully, trying to adequately describe the beauty of the landscape that he had seen from the plane. He talked about the layout of the camp and the Vietnamese landmarks around him. He mentioned the things he was learning, whether they were short Vietnamese phrases or how to use a new weapon. For an hour, he consumed himself with writing down the positive aspects of the things around him. He missed his parents greatly, and he knew their worrying would not make him any safer.

He did not mention Dace, who they had heard about upon his return from basic training. He did not mention the throng of soldiers that he saw using drugs to cope with their environment. He left out the terror of the security sweep in the village. He made no note of the stifling heat, the fattened but ravenous insects, and the omnipresent hunger and thirst of the soldiers. Jack thought in some way that if he suppressed his lamentation of these things to his loved ones, he could suppress the thoughts in his mind.

Jack had been so enveloped in his writing that he was nearly late to the meeting in the command tent. He was one of the last three soldiers to slide into the tent and was unable to secure a seat. He stood in the back, clutching fast to the letter addressed to David and Mary DeRonni.

"Listen up," began CPT Crow gravely. "I hope you boys are making the most of your day to put your feet up. Tomorrow we return to the village, designated
marks men alongside. I have spoken with Major General (MG) Stanback in Quang Ngai, and he will be sending a spy plane to accompany us starting in four days. VC do not like to fight. They do the most damage when they’re not seen, so we’re putting eyes everywhere we can. I would also like to make it absolutely clear that sources of intel in An Khe are compromised."

CPT Crow paused and looked down. When he raised his head again, his eyes were cold and angry.

“Now, an update on our wounded. PFC St. Martin has a fractured arm, and will remain in Qui Nhon for three weeks before returning to base. PFC Conner may face amputation, but has been authorized to return home for better medical treatment in hopes to avoid this procedure. Medical personnel were unable to revive PFC Daniken. He remains comatose in intensive care in Qui Nhon, where he will have to stay until his vitals improve.”

Jack began to bite his nails, first nervously. As he thought of the pain his brothers had endured, the contempt for the brown men on the rooftops grew. His teeth began to grind into his fingertips more violently. Such cowardice, Jack thought. The enemy had hid motionless until the perfect moment, then sprung a horrific attack that was over as quickly as it began. Shooting once or twice, then fleeing had been their objective all along.

Spirits were low as the men filed out of the tent. The news of Dace hung over the head of each soldier. Often, on scheduled days of rest, some soldiers would leave the base and walk a couple miles south before diverting toward the beach in the east. On this day, everyone stayed. The troops had been advised to remain on base,
and it was unlikely that a visit to the beach would alleviate this case of sunken morale. Jack gravitated to the rations tent to receive his midday allotment. He found a bench on which to sit while he ate, but was not alone for long.

Lucas Croppar shuffled over with his ration and took a rough seat on the bench. His unhappiness seemed to diffuse out like a cloud of dust as he dug at his food with disgust.

"You look terrible." It almost sounded like Lucas was mocking him. "You sleep last night?"

"Enough," Jack replied without hiding his annoyance.


PFC Jules Weber sat about ten feet away, without a trace of amusement on his face.

"You ever do any hunting where you're from, Weber?" Lucas was awful talkative, given the moods of those around him.

Jules Weber nodded. Jack knew that PFC Weber had grown up near the Everglades in south Florida, so his imagination came to life with what kinds of critters Weber had chased in his day.

"I'll bet that's where you became such a good shot," Lucas did not relent in his conversation. "My uncle used to bag Black Bears in Northern California. He could pop one between the eyes at two hundred yards." This finally struck a chord with Weber.

"You ever shoot a bear?" Weber put a stop to Lucas' rambling.
“Never had a chance,” he replied.

“Ever unlucky enough to shoot a man?” Weber was still not amused.

“No.” Lucas had lost the power in the conversation.

“Two very – different - things.” Weber paused in between each word for emphasis.

Jack was back in the village. This time, he was not hiding from bullets in a shack, or scanning the rooftops for enemies. Again he found himself standing over the jumbled carcass of the Vietcong fighter. The man’s face was still fresh in his mind. This time, instead of fixing on the sky, the lifeless eyes stared into Jack’s. The resilience of Lucas Croppar’s ignorance brought Jack back to reality.

“I’ll shoot a man given the chance,” he said arrogantly. Jack also had reached his breaking point.

“You haven’t even left the base!” Jack snapped at him.

“I know that,” Croppar retorted. “And I know that I have some learning to do. But my DEROS is six months away, and I’m going to live to see it. I don’t give a damn who or how many I have to shoot to do that.”

DEROS, Jack thought. He had heard the term before. He struggled to recall what it meant. He tried to ignore the exchange between Weber and Croppar as he thought.

“That’s it, huh?” PFC Weber scoffed. “That’s all you care about.”

“Cut the shit, Weber, you know you’re waiting on yours too. We all are,” Croppar shot back aggressively.
Jack snatched the memory that answered his query. He had seen it before on a document. It was on his notice of deployment for Vietnam, underneath the minimal details of his location and tour. It read:

DEROS: 28 MAY 1968

At that moment, Jack remembered. It stood for Date Eligible for Return from Overseas. Lucas Croppar was just trying to make it back home. He had only been in Vietnam for two days, but Jack was not sure he could blame him. Jack was terrified and miserable and wanted nothing more than to go home, but it was no time to admit that to Lucas.

"And if we all just sat around until it was time to go home," Weber began, "who is going to fight for the people of this country? You want to make it home so other young Americans like us, maybe your friends, can die here? You want to let power into the wrong hands and watch the oppression of these citizens from across the world?" His rant only stopped at the sound of Lucas Croppar's laughter.

"Damn, Weber! Whoever brainwashed you did a hell of a job!" He chuckled at him.

PFC Weber stood and made his way for Lucas, but Jack had watched the entire argument closely. Within seconds he was between the two soldiers with his hands on Weber's chest. Jack's reaction had been too quick to consider the consequences of stepping in the way of an angry soldier with much more combat experience. Luckily, Weber stopped at Jack's hands, his face inches from Jack's. Jack searched for words, but found none, instead just shaking his head pleadingly at
Weber. The soldier exhaled powerfully through his nose, which only further reminded Jack of an antagonized bull, then returned to his seat. Lucas Croppar ignored an opportunity to let the matter drop.

"Think about it," he continued. "We had spies in An Khe. Those motherfuckers knew about the ambush, and they sold us out. Who are we fighting for? The villagers don't want us here. The NVA and VC want us dead. Nobody is on our side, Weber." But Jules Weber had heard all he wanted to, and was done arguing.

"You're insane," he dismissed Croppar with obvious hatred.

"That may be." Croppar just could not stop. "But at least I'm not here to die for someone who doesn't want me to. You think we can eliminate communism by killing gooks. And you want to tell me what's insane."
Chapter 6

"Maybe nothing's so unfunny as an omen read wrong."

-Michael Herr, Dispatches

After the unpleasant lunch experience with two of his comrades, Jack prepared to make his way to the armory for his equipment inspection. These plans were interrupted when word reached Jack that another debriefing meeting had been scheduled to take place immediately. He took his equipment with him to the command tent and took no chances with punctuality this time. He was the second soldier to enter, and meandered his way to the second row of chairs, were PVTs and other non-officers sat. He sat in a rickety chair next to PFC Reuben Schutt.

"Any idea what this one's about?" Jack quietly inquired of Reuben.

Reuben shook his head and whispered back, "Usually important if we skip an equipment inspection."

Jack sat in silence while the rest of the tent filled up. CPT Crow had been using the radio outside the tent, and waited until all attendees had arrived before marching to the front and taking his place behind a giant table. He walked with his hands behind his back, looking even more somber than in the morning. He wasted no time once he was in his position and had the attention of his men.

"I received unfortunate word from CPT Barnes in Chu Lai. The NLF has undertaken offensive ambush strategies on multiple American camps. He believes that our location is known by the enemy and we may be the next stop. That being
said, you boys need to be sharp on the watch, as you know. Now.” He paused. “I have one more announcement.”

CPT Crow shifted his weight and gathered himself before looking back out upon the soldiers.

“It is with great sadness that I inform you of the passing of one of our own. PFC Daniken lost a critical amount of blood during the lift to Qui Nhon. He passed this afternoon. Let us observe a moment of silence for our fallen brother.”

The faces of the soldiers remained frozen for a moment, then several bowed their heads. The men who wore hats removed them and wrinkled them in balled fists. Jack fixed his gaze on the bottom of a chair leg in front of him. At first, his mind was empty. He was only aware of the CPT’s words bouncing back and forth between his ears.

Jack thought of home again. But this time, it was not Nebraska for which he longed. He thought of Dace’s home. He thought of West Virginia, where Dace’s family lived and worked and hoped their boy would come home. It was not Dace who would return to his cabin in West Virginia, but a folded American flag in his place. Jack thought of the knock on the door that would bring with it more pain imaginable for the Daniken family. Lastly, Jack thought again of the village and the three feet between him and Dace. Three feet diverted the bullet from Jack, and the same three feet sent an American flag to West Virginia instead of Nebraska.

Jack’s blood began to boil with guilty rage. He had so much compassion for the enemy fighter he had seen killed. It haunted him. Jack had a hard time imagining any compassion for the Americans on the part of the VC fighters. For the first time,
Jack considered what it would really take to survive Vietnam. He considered what Lucas Croppar had said. Maybe Jack didn’t fully understand why they were there or why they had to kill the strange men of this country, but there was no room for men with a sense of remorse.

The soldiers were required to complete at least brief equipment inspection and maintenance after the meeting. Jack was beside himself as he made his way to the armory. He was oblivious to his surroundings and numb to his thoughts. He failed to notice the sky darkening for the first time since his arrival three days earlier. The wind had picked up only slightly, but the humidity blanketed the camp with increased thickness. He followed closely behind PFC Weber, who carried his long, slender M40 rifle close to his chest. Jack noticed the butt of the rifle bobbing near Weber’s right elbow. It had some kind of markings on it, so Jack angled his steps to the right to get a closer look. Once he was only a step behind PFC Weber, he recognized the decoration on the gun – they were tallies. Weber had crudely etched four vertical lines into the butt of his weapon with a knife. Jack didn’t have to think long about what they could have meant.

“Ever been unlucky enough to shoot a man?” Weber’s words from the afternoon rang in Jack’s memory. His mind revisited his VC friend again, picturing the man’s body careening to the ground after being impacted by Weber’s bullet. Jack understood, but pondered the necessity of the tallies. Killing a man was something that stuck with a soldier forever. Jack recognized in PFC Weber the unfeeling agent of death he thought he needed to become to survive a place like An Khe. He swallowed and tried to convince himself further that it was something he could do.
After a quick inspection of his M16 returned a satisfactory rating, Jack looked at his equipment with the armory personnel. It was decided that his belt was too large, and in order to carry fragmentation grenades, pliers, and other necessary equipment, a tighter one would need to replace it. Jack had not noticed until that moment that he had lost considerable weight in the last three days alone. Jack was outfitted appropriately and departed from the armory for the rations tent.

By the time Jack had quickly consumed his inadequate evening rations the sky had darkened into an ominous charcoal sheet.

"We might get wet," said PFC Abe Miller as he passed by. Jack nodded and stood up. It was time to head in the direction of the bungalows on the East edge of the camp for his watch. His stomach churned slightly as he recalled CPT Crow's concern for an imminent ambush. He would be with Weber, whose resilience comforted him again.

It seemed as if 2LT had read Jack's mind when he stopped him in the middle of camp.

"DeRonni, I've already shared this with the rest of the company. If it rains during your watch, the motion sensors will be thrown off. Charlie definitely doesn't mind getting wet, so it is important to remain focused. That being said, PFC Weber will have thermal from a box on the top of the building. He will have better visual, and knows what he's looking for. If you see any movement, you defer to him. Do not engage without his approval. Clear?"

"Clear." Jack disliked his arrangement more each moment.
Jack walked the rest of the way to the eastern edge of camp. He could feel moisture in the air, but precipitation was yet to arrive. He walked into one of the bungalows to find PFC Croppar lighting a cigarette. There was an empty chair to his left, staring out the window and through the barbed wire.

"Smoke?" Croppar offered his partner. Jack had not yet fallen victim to the temptation, which was made easy by the stinginess of his comrades with their cigarettes. He looked at the sky, but it was too dark to see much of anything.

"Yeah," he decided, and held out his hand. "Thanks."

An hour of the watch passed without any activity. Conversation was kept at a minimum again, save for the occasional nervous flares from Lucas. He asked basic questions to break the silence, which obviously made him uncomfortable.

"What do boys in Nebraska do for entertainment?"

"Y'ever been to a Major League game?"

"Do you have a girl back home?"

The last question in particular made Jack think. He had dated a girl for a year at the end of high school, but she had gone her own way when she enrolled at the University of Nebraska. He had not spoken with her in months.

"Can't really say that I do," admitted Jack without enthusiasm.

"Oh well. A skinny guy like you has to catch some doll's attention. Me, I've got two of them. It can be hard to keep 'em in the dark, but they keep me feeling good."

Lucas' misogyny bothered Jack much less than his arrogance.

"Well, I'll bet that's fun," Jack added sarcastically. The pair returned to silence for a brief while, which apparently invited the rain. It began softly, but its ferocity
increased as time passed. Jack looked over as Lucas lit another cigarette and became concerned with what he saw in the dim glow of the ash. Lucas' hands were trembling and covered with a layer of sweat that shone in the light. The rain was coming down in sheets now.

A stray blip appeared on the motion sensors every few minutes, and Jack raised his binoculars to look through the waterfall that crashed across the window frame. The window was a simple open square to the outside, so the rain crashed onto the sill at the bottom and soaked the soldiers' clothes. Lucas had grown fidgety and felt the need to open his mouth again.

"Do you think an ambush is really likely on this base?" The words spilled out of his mouth, made fragile by his nervousness. "Wouldn't they be outnumbered?"

More blips surfaced on the radar, but closer together. Jack held a hand up to silence Lucas and peered desperately through his binoculars. The blips had stopped, but the rain drove on. Jack suddenly became aware of how quiet it was around them. The rain crashed down around them, but the night had taken on a lethal silence that began to cook Jack's nerves as well. After another empty view through the binoculars, Jack thought of it at once – PFC Weber.

Jack stood and tapped the ceiling of the shack with the butt of his rifle, hoping to hear taps back from Weber. He heard nothing. The radar activity had picked up, with six consecutive blips in relatively the same spot. Jack felt the sweat dripping down the back of his neck as he raised the binoculars to his eyes. The radar was picking up something significant directly in front of the shack.
Jack scanned the stretch of land before him, and stopped dead on an object that he did not recognize. He tried to no avail to focus the binoculars further, but it was not necessary. The figure stayed low to the ground, but moved towards them. The clarity of Jack’s vision increased as the figure drew closer.

“Target spotted!” He whispered hoarsely to PFC Croppar. “See if you can get Weber’s attention, and hand me the radio.” Lucas tapped the ceiling furiously, but no answer came. He turned to grab the radio, but froze. Jack dared to remove the binoculars from his eyes for a second. “What?”

The two soldiers were disheartened by what they saw on the floor of the shack. The radio sat partially submerged in a puddle that had formed in the dirt. Lucas grabbed it and put the microphone to his mouth.

“Target spotted on East boundary, unable to identify,” he whimpered. “Repeat, target on East boundary.” The radio didn’t even produce any static. “Fuck.” Lucas tossed the radio aside.

“He’s getting closer.” Jack had jammed the binoculars into his eyes, but his shaking hands prevented him from holding them steady. He could only make out the outline of the figure. It had a very large head and carried a slender object with both hands while remaining low to the ground. “I think he’s armed.” Jack’s words became more frantic. He grabbed his M16, and Lucas grabbed binoculars after making one more futile knock on the ceiling.

“We have to do something.” Lucas was in hysterics. The figure was no more than one hundred yards away. Jack could see the spray of the raindrops as they exploded off the figure’s shoulders. “We’re under attack!” Jack trembled as he rested
his rifle on the windowsill. His heart beat against his ribs like a wild animal trying to escape a cage. Then, in an instant, the terrifying tension of the night was shattered.

Words came from nearby outside the shack. They rocketed into the night air and exploded in the sky. Jack listened, positioning his finger on the trigger.

“Du’ung lai! Du’ung lai!” It was unmistakably Vietnamese.

The Americans heard the slosh of footsteps approaching the shack in the swampy grass. The figure in the distance broke into a run. The footsteps got closer and louder.

“Du’ung lai!” The figure ran harder.

“They’re here!” PFC Croppar screamed and aimed his weapon at the door.

“Shoot him!”

Jack gritted his teeth and pulled the trigger three times. Nine bullets screamed through the Vietnamese air toward the target as the door to the shack burst open.

“DeRonni, Croppar, coming in! Hold your fire!” The warning was unheard by the ringing ears inside the bungalow.

Jack felt a freight train hit him from the left as he reached for his knife.

“Check your fire! Friendly!” PFC Jules Weber screamed at PFC Croppar from on top of Jack. The warning was too late. Lucas had already resolved to fire on whatever came through the door. In an incredible stroke of luck, the familiar voice of Weber had caused him to flinch upward, and the burst fired through the doorway above the two Americans on the floor. “Hold your fire damn it!”
As soon as it had begun, the moment of chaos was over. PFC Weber scrambled up and looked through the scope on his rifle.

"The target is alone. Either a spy or non-hostile!" His angry words emerged between breaths. "Let's go. Croppar, cover our six."

The three soldiers made their way out of the shack, weapons raised in three different directions, moving as one unit. They were upon the target in no time, and Weber kept his rifle fixed on the motionless heap.

"Son of a bitch, DeRonni. What the hell did you do?!" PFC Weber shouted in disbelief.

The three soldiers finally reached their target, and Jack came across a familiar sight. For the second time, he looked into the dead eyes in the middle of a small Vietnamese face. Only this time, the terrified eyes belonged to a woman. Jack looked helplessly at her on the ground. Her triangular straw hat had fallen off her head, and her bamboo rake lay several feet away in the flooded grass. Several holes in her midsection contributed to the darkening pool of blood beneath her. The little rice farmer had long since stopped breathing.
Jack was roused roughly at 0700 hours.

"Get up, dumbass. The Captain is ready for you," the words were dropped on his head by 2LT Bell.

Jack did not even consider stopping by the rations tent on his way to the command center. He trudged through the camp and felt the piercing stares of the soldiers who were already up. He felt like a death row inmate completing his last mile to the gallows. The intense regret that consumed him at the core would not be enough to save him. He wanted to disappear. He secretly wished a sinkhole would open beneath him as he stepped foot into the command tent.

CPT Crow sat at the table with 2LT Bell by his side. Two chairs sat across from the table, one of which supported the weary bones of PFC Weber. Jack wondered briefly why they had not thought to include PFC Croppar in this business, who was inches from creating another friendly casualty for the Americans.


"No, thank you sir," was all Jack managed to get out.

"Very well." Crow’s voice was surprisingly calm. "Private, the military of the United States of America does things a certain way." Perhaps Jack had mistaken his
low speaking volume for a calm demeanor. “A commanding officer gave you an
order last night, and you disobeyed it willingly. That is a serious offense.”

Jack tried to nod. His head didn’t move. 2LT Bell spoke next, and it quickly
became apparent why Crow had chosen to remain calm.

“Private DeRonni, you chicken-neck little dip shit – I told you that you were
not to engage any targets! You were to defer to Private Weber! Private Weber, did
private DeRonni contact you in any way before taking action?”

Jules Weber finally spoke. “He did not, lieutenant. I repeatedly attempted to
make radio contact with Privates DeRonni and Croppar but received no answer. I
told them to hold their fire until I could get a better look at the target.”

Jack spoke without thinking. “But sir, the radio-“

“You would be very wise not to speak until asked to, Private.” Crow shut him
up quickly. “Continue to recount the events from your perspective, Private Weber.”

“I assured Private DeRonni on the radio that I saw the target and was
tracking her. I asked him to confirm that he would standby until I had a better look,
but it was silent on his end. After several attempts to reach him, I began to worry. I
thought perhaps the privates were asleep, so I dropped to the ground from my post
to check on them. It was only then that I realized how close the target had gotten. I
yelled at her in her native language to ‘Stop.’ This threw her into a panic and she
began to run.”

Jack was rapidly piecing the event together using PFC Weber’s account. The
more he talked, the less competent Jack sounded to CPT Crow and 2LT Bell.
"I heard panicked dialogue between Privates DeRonni and Croppar and commotion inside the shack. At that point, I was forced to compromise our location and yelled to the two that I was coming into the shack."

2LT Bell butted in. "Did either of you see or hear anything to suggest that this person in the field was not alone?"

"No, sir," answered PFC Weber quickly.

Jack was afraid of answering incorrectly, so he simply repeated what Weber had said. "No, sir."

"Continue," 2LT Bell nodded to PFC Weber.

"I was unable to get inside the shack before Private DeRonni engaged the target. My entrance startled Private Croppar, who also discharged his weapon in my direction."

"Was anyone injured?" asked Crow.

"Only the civilian casualty," responded PFC Weber. Jack shuddered. Civilian casualty. He knew he was in trouble.

"Now, Private DeRonni," 2LT Bell turned to Jack. "You have one chance to explain why in the hell you engaged a target against the orders of a commanding officer, while simultaneously failing to communicate in the field of battle."

Jack began to spill out his excuses, stringing words together at a ridiculous pace because of his nervousness. "Sir, the rain negated the use of our electronics. Our radar became unreliable and our radio was submerged. We never received any communication from Private Weber because it was out of commission."
2LT Bell wasn’t buying it. “Maybe you didn’t receive radio communication, but your dumbass negligence for your radio is not going to explain a civilian casualty to anybody. What about when Private Weber yelled a warning not to engage the target from outside the shack?”

“Sir, I never heard any words from Private Weber from outside the shack. I heard Vietnamese dialect being shouted and someone approaching the shack. Private Croppar began to yell at me to engage the target.”

“That ‘Vietnamese dialect’ you heard was Private Weber! He said so himself!” Bell was starting to raise his voice.

“Sir, with all due respect, how was I to tell that the man approaching the shack was an American speaking Vietnamese?”

Bell became irate. “You mean to tell me that you can’t tell the difference between your own comrade yelling in some chopped up Vietnamese slang from when one of those rice monkeys speaks it? I’ve heard enough.”

CPT Crow was ready to wrap things up. “Private DeRonni, this is a clear cut case of insubordination. We would have handled this last night, but I needed to sleep, as we have a mission tonight that I will be part of. Because we waited until this morning, the nearest chopper has been sent to a different base for an assignment. It will be available in six days, at which point it will pick you up. You will be taken to the military airport in Qui Nhon and flown back to the United States for court-martial. Do you have any questions?”

Jack was speechless. He could not believe what had happened to him in the last twelve hours. He wanted so desperately for someone to understand how
terrifying the situation had been and that he acted in the only way he knew how. Only Lucas Croppar would understand. Jack wondered where the hell Lucas was and why he was not being treated the same way. He barely managed to answer CPT Crow’s question.

“No, sir.” Jack did not make eye contact with Crow.

“Turn in your equipment to the armory. You are to be unarmed until your departure. Dismissed.”

Jack managed a glance at Crow’s face, and was glad he hadn’t looked at it before. The Captain’s eyes bore holes into Jack and he was certain that if Crow had his way, he would have executed Jack himself. Jack stood and slowly moved toward the exit. His spirit was broken, and it felt as if his legs were too. He had just made it to the door when he heard his name from behind him.

“Private DeRonni.”

Jack reluctantly turned around.

“Jack DeRonni. Mail for you.” It was the man with the thick eyebrows behind the mail desk, and he had a small, stained envelope in his hand. Jack walked over and accepted the envelope, and could feel himself melting from the stares of CPT Crow, 2LT Bell and PFC Weber.

“Thank you,” the boy from Nebraska muttered. He moped out of the tent and across the camp to the armory. He folded the envelope into his shirt as he approached the fenced-in weapons tent. He lifted the sling of his M16 from his shoulder and handed it to 1LT Francis, who was usually the face of the armory and equipment inspections. He handed over his unused fragmentation grenades, his
survival knife, his entrenching shovel, and his Colt pistol. From there, he ignored the
growling of his stomach and returned to his sleeping quarters.

The rest of the platoon had been roused for a morning debriefing meeting.
Jack knew that his actions would be a major topic of discussion. However, he wanted
badly enough to know something about Crow's new mission, so he walked toward
the command tent with the other soldiers. 2LT Bell met him halfway, just like he had
the fateful evening before.

"Private DeRonni, your participation in unit meetings will not be necessary
from this point forward." Bell seemed to gain satisfaction from denying Jack access.

So began Jack's existence as a pariah in the base. His fellow soldiers went out
of their way not to talk to him, and he ate alone. He spent a good portion of the first
day trying to sleep in the quartering tent, but it proved rather difficult in the heat.
However, in the late afternoon, it began to rain again and the air cooled
considerably. Jack slipped into a much-needed deep sleep around 1900 hours and
slept until the next morning.

Jack awoke with the rest of the soldiers when they were roused for the day's
operations. His shirt was damp with sweat, and his chest felt heavy. The thin cotton
blanket that usually only covered his legs had kept him cocooned all night. He took
his time sitting up in the cot while the other soldiers scrambled to gather their gear.
He felt as if a patch had been sewn into his skin above his heart. He ran his hand
over it and finally realized what was going on. He had forgotten all about the letter
he had received the day before.
The humidity was already burdensome, so Jack hopped off his cot and walked over to the table where he had written his parents a couple days earlier, which felt like a century to him. He pulled out the letter dampened by his perspiration and unfolded it. It was hand-written and somewhat brief. He scanned to the bottom for a signature, where he found his sister’s name. He began reading with uncontainable excitement. He wanted nothing more than to hear from home at the time. The letter read:

Jackie,

I am so sorry I did not have a chance to write you while you were at training. I sent this as soon as mom and dad gave me your mailing address overseas. I was very disturbed when I heard that you had been drafted, and I cannot believe that you’re actually in Vietnam. I worry about you, little brother.

Things have been crazy here in Chicago and back home in general, as you probably have heard. The Negroes have begun rioting and the National Guard has gotten involved. There were incidents in Detroit that showed that our generation is not afraid to fight for what is right. It’s a beautiful time of enlightenment in our country, and I wish our president could see the progress like we do. It makes me so sad that my brother has to fight his war. We are not the same country we used to be. We have learned to treat all people with respect, and that peace and love are the keys to happiness. There is no place for killing others for having different political views.

Jack, what I am trying to say is that you don’t have to do this. You shouldn’t be risking your life for Vietnam’s war. I know you have plans to go to school soon. This is not part of your plan, and it shouldn’t be. Please be safe, and if you figure out how to
get out of there safely, there is absolutely no shame in it. I have made friends here with men who have deserted, and they are happy. Remember, this isn’t your war, but it is your life. Please write me back and tell me you’re okay. I love you, Jackie.

Giulia

When Jack was finished reading, he stared blankly at the green canvas wall. His view gradually got blurry as his eyes began to fill with tears. He missed his sister, his mother, and his father. He missed Nebraska and the fields of the farm, quiet and free of gunfire. Jack’s sister was right, he wanted to go home. He was going home, but he was not sure if he would see his family. His tears became hotter and faster as he imagined the disappointment he would bring upon his family.

He cussed himself for once dreaming that he would return to the United States a war hero. He was selfish enough to consider the benefits his stint in the military would bring for his political aspirations. He never imagined that America would be so unsupportive while her sons were condemned to death in an effort to help another nation. Although her concern was evident, it appeared not even his own sister was proud of him. Jack could not entertain the thought of what she would think of him now.

Over the next few days, Jack found himself alone with his thoughts, and they were always glad to torture him. He was an outcast in the camp, and he would be an outcast back home. He had fantasized about becoming a celebrated veteran. Instead he was returning under entirely different conditions. As the military saw it, he was a
murderer. He was incompetent and untrustworthy. For hours, Jack would sit and try to comprehend how he had gotten to where he was. A promising soldier had faltered and brought disgrace upon himself and the American military. He squirmed as he considered the possibility of jail time when he got home.

Jack could not keep himself from reliving the events of the rainy night. He imagined the series of events and exploded with frustration at his actions, having since learned exactly what was going on. He thought about his naiveté and the panicked decisions he had made. He was embarrassed, angry, and most of all, he was regretful. His harrowing descent to dishonor could have been avoided if he had just taken care of his radio. He damned his negligence and Lucas Croppar both in the same breath.

Then, Jack's mind began to wander, a phenomenon that he had missed. He hadn't seen PFC Croppar since the night of disaster. The other soldiers kept Jack out of the loop, so he had never looked into Lucas' disappearance. Surely he was to receive some of the blame for Jack's actions. He was every bit as panicked, and the radio was his fault as well. Jack was befuddled by his absence and wondered if he had already been sent home. He did not have to wonder long, as the impossible happened on the fourth day of his purgatory in the base.

Jack felt a hand on his back, and quickly turned to see PFC Abe Miller standing over him, pleasantly blocking the sun. Neither spoke for a moment.

"Hey," Miller began. "DeRonni, I know you and I know you a good man. Hate to see you like this."
Jack had nearly gotten used to the reluctant small talk from the other soldiers, but PFC Miller’s words rang with sincerity. It was a wonderful surprise.

“Thanks. Means a lot.” Jack actually felt hesitant to talk to someone when faced with the opportunity he had longed for.

“I just wanted to tell you before you gone that I know you did what anybody woulda done. You was scared. We all are. I’m scared shitless out here sometimes.”

With that, Miller’s hand began to slide off Jack’s shoulder as he turned to walk away.

“Abe,” Jack stopped him. He had so many questions. He wanted to know about Crow’s mission and what was in store for him back home, but he asked the question that bothered him most. “Where’s Croppar?”

“Thought you had heard,” Miller replied. “Qui Nhon. Got a bad case of paranoia. Trying to see if he schizo or something.”

“Shit,” Jack muttered. Abe grunted in agreement. He then extended his hand, which Jack took as he stood up.

“G’luck.” Abe was a man of few words, but he meant the ones he said.

“Thanks,” Jack said, while releasing Abe’s hand. PFC Miller turned and began a trot in the other direction.

Jack sunk down back into his seat. The news of Croppar had shaken him, but did not surprise him in hindsight. The twitching and fidgeting by PFC Croppar a few nights earlier no longer seemed so out of place. Jack leaned forward and rested his head in his hands while he thought about Lucas. He had certainly carried a different attitude in regard to the war. It was a concept that Jack struggled with quite often. Croppar had made a point that Jack could not get out of his mind. None of the
soldiers knew *exactly* why they were in this jungle in Vietnam. Nobody knew *exactly* how killing Vietnamese insurgents was going to protect the United States from communism.

Jack saw things in a new light because of his comrade. He actually began to think he might owe Croppar a debt of gratitude, because it was his words that allowed Jack to finally realize why he himself was in Vietnam. It was possible that the young soldier did not understand the political power struggle that required the intervention of the military. Jack had lay awake on most nights trying to wrap his head around it, but had just now come up with something else. He was not in Vietnam to fight against communism. He was there to fight for the United States and all the people and things in his country that he loved so much.

Jack had been blind that night in the shack. He acted with irresponsible haste and panic. Perhaps the death of Dace had shaken him more than he realized. He had failed in his duty as a soldier, and he was ready to face the consequences. His regret would likely never wane, but his self-pity would have to. He was ready to accept that he had made mistakes. He would need to, because his work in Vietnam was not quite finished.
Chapter 8

"Greater love hath no man than to lay down his life for another."
-John 15:13

The sky darkened early and rain threatened as Jack returned to the tent for the evening. A cool breeze relieved the soldiers while a few completed gear inspections and others prepared for their shifts as guards. Jack sat on his cot for a while, impatient with the long days of nothingness. He dreaded his trip back to the United States, and this dread was amplified by his stagnant wait on the base. In his boredom, he thought of the irony of the situation. He was consumed by fear of his exodus from Vietnam, while every other soldier only dreamed of it.

A few soldiers tasked with early morning guard shifts made themselves comfortable as they prepared to get a little bit of sleep. Jack’s conversation with PFC Miller had at least momentarily convinced him he was not unanimously hated, so he spoke to one of them.

"Hey, what is the purpose of this new mission that Crow is going on?" He asked of PFC Renteria.

Renteria was a lanky, dark-skinned man of obvious Hispanic descent. His path to Vietnam was paved by the man his Mexican mother had married, a war hawk and WWII veteran from New York. It was said among the unit that killing was in his blood, and he had volunteered long before the draft could get to him. He turned slowly to Jack, as if he was offended at the attempt to reach out to him.

"Still thirsty for blood, DeRonni?" He mocked his comrade.
Jack had no retort. He looked at Renteria with dumb contempt. Renteria was no more amused by his mockery than anyone else, and to Jack's surprise, kept talking.

"We figured out where a bunch of them rats have been hiding. You know Crow loves a good rat chase, and he can navigate those tunnels 'bout as good as those little gulpers. Fragged a few of the tunnels last night, going back out tomorrow night with a bigger group. Hope is that we can clean them VC out from under the city so the bastards stop showing up in the city."

Jack nodded his gratitude to PFC Renteria. To him it sounded like progress. To the soldiers, it probably seemed like another chance of being killed. He was an outsider, and would not make the mistake of thinking he was a part of it, but that did not stop him from becoming hopeful. Eradication of the VC meant more safety for American troops. The proverbial thorn in the belly of the unit could be removed if the mission were successful. This thought comforted Jack as he slid into sleep.

In the morning, Jack awoke alone in the tent. He had woken briefly when the other soldiers were roused, but close his eyes shortly thereafter and slept for another two hours. He sat up and noticed that the heat again was not as oppressive as usual. A light rain was already falling outside. Jack felt an anvil land at the bottom of his empty stomach as he watch the drops hit the ground.

It was the fifth day of his captivity in the camp, and he had only one to go. Jack resolved to find some way to occupy his time, because solitude with his thoughts was wearing his psyche thin. He considered walking the grounds, but the thought of appearing as the miscreant soldier wandering aimlessly about the camp
did not appeal to him. He figured he would save that activity for when the majority of the unit left for the mission in the evening.

Jack pulled the paper out from under his shirt and read the letter from his sister two more times. It felt so good to hear from somebody back home, but Jack could not understand how his sister could say such things. He spent the morning and earlier afternoon staring at the rain and thinking about what his sister had written. He began feeling sick when he considered the cultural fragility of the United States. Americans back home were too busy rioting and hurting each other to care about the Americans getting hurt in Vietnam.

Jack wondered what had happened to the glory and gratitude reserved for a veteran, a notion that seemed gone with the days of the Second World War. Another thought jostled for position and made Jack regret having read the letter again. His brother Dace had died in the field of battle, but for him there was no glory. There would be no tributary trumpets. To anyone other than the Daniken family, he was just another number in the death toll in Vietnam, just one more insignificant reason to raise a little hell against the establishment. Jack spat on the ground as he considered this egregious tragedy and left the tent in search of his evening rations.

The rainfall had been light but consistent throughout the day, turning the ground beneath Jack to a grassy soup. No soldier was present in the rations tent, so Jack waited inside the tent on a chair until the officer returned. Jack knew better than to help himself to rations and knew that his status in the camp was all the more reason to be patient. He gobbled his meal, but had to force himself to drink his
canteen. It had been a cool day and Jack had not moved much, so his dehydration was minimal.

Nearby, Jack saw soldiers exiting the command tent, where he assumed the rations officer had come from moments earlier. The unit was preparing for the night excursion into Vietcong territory. Jack watched as the men armed themselves and equipped the jungle rainwear they had been issued. The group was much larger than the camp had sent out before, and Jack counted more than twenty soldiers. When the last soldier stepped out of the command tent, a cold tremor reverberated in Jack's back. The black face paint dissolved his expression and emphasized cold, steely eyes reminiscent of a predator that intensely enjoyed his hunt. CPT Crow, with 2LT Bell only a step behind, led the unit past Jack toward the western edge of the base.

The unit marched in two lines in a solemn unison somewhat resembling a funeral procession. Jack watched every soldier pass by, his boots sinking into the mud outside the rations tent. Soon enough the machine was gone as each of its forty or fifty-some legs carried it into the jungle. The rain followed the Americans, slowing to a stop shortly after their disappearance. The base was quiet, and Jack's anger had subsided after he filled his stomach. He decided it was time for a walk. Jack decided to walk a perimeter around the small base. He started at the northern border, just past the command tent. He stared at the healthy green sheet of jungle in front of him. Its brilliant color reminded him of the masses of cornfields back in his home state. The beauty of the vegetation before him was almost irresistible, and Jack felt an urge to enter and explore. He stood still and suppressed
his curiosity as he remembered the plethora of death traps facing off in the depths of this jungle.

Jack stared at the jungle for a good amount of time. A nice breeze from the northwest that retained a bit of moisture cooled his face. For a moment, he pretended there was no United States military center of command right behind him. He imagined the jungle in front of him was innocent and free of contraptions designed to maim or kill a human being. He pretended there were no brown men tucked away into the landscape all around the beautiful country, waiting for the moment to slay an unsuspecting American giant. As he walked the rest of the jungle line, Jack tried his best to feel like a tourist.

Jack’s thoughts were magnetized back to the war when he approached the edge of the trench on the south side of camp. Only one soldier sat in the cramped aisle below him, propping his feet against its wall. Next to him sat a silent motion sensor and a well-polished shotgun. Jack looked down the length of the trench, a hot laceration in the Vietnamese turf. Again he wondered how beautiful the landscape would be without its scars.

When Jack reached the east edge of camp, just south of the bungalows, he became aware of the sloshing beneath him. He splashed loudly as his boots pounded the soggy earth below. Jack knew he was all too familiar with the eastern edge of camp. The sky was getting darker, and somewhere behind the clouds the sun had sunk below the jungle trees. He made a sharp left to stroll through the middle of camp back to the sleeping quarters. It was dark by the time he reached his cot and laid down.
Jack was not tired, so he lay awake and stared into the blackness above him, guessing as to how far it was to the sloping top of the tent. For a long few moments he thought of anything he could to get his mind off the night in the bungalow and Weber's condemning tardiness. He grappled again with the process of how his parents were going to learn of his misfortune. He thought it was best not to write them before his trial, and his heart began to pound while he considered having to write from federal prison. The thought did not disturb Jack for long and he quickly found a pressing distraction.

He heard commotion rising across the camp from his cot, and sat up for lack of knowing what else to do. The American voices had grown loud and excited, and soon grew frantic. This prodded Jack to stand up and walk to the edge of the tent, where he did not remain for long. The hurried speech of the soldiers on the other side of camp came to a climax and bounded into a scream. It was finally loud enough for Jack to understand the individual words.

"VC! VC! We're under attack!" The words were barely finished before the heavy air was torn apart by gunfire.

Jack recognized the first string of fire as an M16 burst, but hit the ground nonetheless. There he lay, petrified again amidst the shouting. The M16 fire increased as more soldiers slid into the trench and joined the gunfight. The bursts from the American weapons were joined by the thick pops of occasional shotgun fire. Soon the American artillery received an answer in the form of ethnic shouts and powerful semi-automatic fire. The multilingual shouting fused with gunfire until it
was just one incessant bundle of lethal noise. Jack closed his eyes and buried his face into the ground.

The explosions followed after a short time. “Frag going up!” Seconds after the shout, a blinding flash tore apart the field beyond the trench, rocketing mud, grass, and incising metal shrapnel in every direction. A moment later, another grenade blasted a hole into the field. Jack had raised his head just enough to look across the camp at the trench and the muzzle flashes that lit up the night. He was still on the ground, and his chest felt the cold groundwater that had reached him through his shirt. He contemplated standing up and making a run for the tent.

Jack was tempted by cowardice. The tent that held his cot beckoned to him with open arms. War criminal or not, he was going home the next day. However, he could not push himself off the ground. He considered the unthinkable. If the hidden enemy in that field were to overrun the Americans fighting for their lives in the trench, Jack would be alone and unarmed. There was no telling what kind of horrifying encounter awaited him if that happened. He arrived at his decision and barely managed to push himself up with trembling arms.

One fact was louder to Jack than all of the gunfire and explosions across the camp – he was still unarmed. The armory was his only hope, and it faced him from across the south side of camp. The darkness cloaked him as he kept low to the ground and leaned into a dead sprint for its doors. As Jack ran, he struggled to pilot his body and fought against the buckling of his legs as his body shook in terror. He reached the gate of the small armory and felt around for the handle. After momentary fumbling, his hands found something that almost caused Jack to faint.
The gate was locked, as it was every night. Vietcong ambushes were usually executed to obtain American weapons. The chain link fence that kept Jack out of the small shack was topped with tightly strung barbed wire. Jack prepared himself to bloody his hands and likely his face as he placed his boot in one of the lower gaps on the fence. As he pulled himself up and prepared to climb, another thought stopped him. He was unsure as to how he would get the weapons back over the fence, especially without drawing attention to himself. He didn’t know if the shack inside the fence was also locked, for which he would have no remedy. As if the first two were not enough, the last issue convinced Jack to drop from the fence.

The M2 Browning 0.50 caliber machine gun rested on the outer bank of the trench, pointed at the field. Jack had his work cut out for him. He thought of his mother and father in Nebraska and silently asked God to watch over them. He galloped toward the trench, half expecting it to be the last thing he would ever do. Jack would never remember the steps to the trench and whether he took five of them or five hundred. He was there quickly and slid boots-first into the muddy cavern below.

“Private DeRonni entering! Check your fire!” Jack screamed as his boots made impact and shocked his ankles. Only one soldier was close enough to notice his entrance, his back against the trench wall as he reloaded his rifle. Jack knew that his reputation had no implications in this trench. He brushed past the soldier shoving a new cartridge into the bottom of his gun. The gunfire above and shouting had not subsided.
After tiptoeing his way to the heavy machine gun, Jack hesitated before pulling himself into position behind it. The chilling scream of a nearby soldier snapped him out of it.

"Grenade! Take cover!"

This is the end, Jack thought. He flopped into the dirt, closed his eyes and covered his ears. He imagined what it would be like to die. After several of the longest seconds of his life, he knew he wasn’t about to find out. The grenade exploded in the field, where a quick-handed American soldier had tossed it back up. The courage of his comrade inspired Jack to hoist himself into position immediately. He took a deep breath and hammered his thumbs into the triggers.

The .50 caliber gun produced a roar unmatched by any of the other artillery. All other noise and commotion ceased to exist for the young man behind the weapon. Jack was deafened by its power but swept the tall grass with the barrel anyway as the shells came pouring out the side. He sprayed the heavy bullets into the grass in a fan shaped motion similar to an oscillating turret and did not stop shooting for nearly ten seconds. When he stopped, the field had grown silent.

A couple seconds later, Jack heard the guttural shouts of Vietnamese as a few figures rose from the grass and bounded in his direction. He whipped the weapon to the nearest figure and gritted his teeth as he dropped his thumbs again. Jack watched the stream of bullets explode the upper half of the man in front of him as they impacted his chest. In the flash of unimaginable violence that funneled into his eyes, Jack stopped thinking as a human being. He became one with his weapon and swung it back and forth to align with any figure that arose from the grass. He
snapped further to the right and tore a man in half with several more rounds. He swayed back left and cut down another fleeing figure.

Jack dropped several bodies, but they kept coming at him. They were both fearless and reckless, and some of them got too close for comfort before being dissected. After several minutes of carnage, the enemy found a way around Jack's assault. Another figure popped up far down the trench to Jack's right, and he ripped the gun to focus on it. It was too late. This man was only feet from the trench, and Jack had reached the extent of the gun's turning radius. He fired a string of futile rounds as the crazed man belly flopped into the trench.

One soldier stood between Jack and the Vietcong, but his reaction was not quick enough. The maniac intruder shouted in his ethnic tongue as he took down the American soldier with his submachine gun. He emptied the clip into Jack's comrade with sporadic fire and a few bullets tore into the dirt at Jack's sides. Jack was a dead man if he didn't act quickly.

Jack used the time the VC needed to reload to close the distance between him and the fallen American fighter. The private's rifle was not within reach, so Jack pulled a .44 magnum revolver from his waist. He raised the barrel of the weapon towards the chest of the enemy, but he had already made a costly mistake. Rather than reloading, the brown man had tossed the weapon and drawn a machete from his belt. He was on top of Jack immediately, and Jack pulled the trigger without aiming.

Jack's shot missed, but the machete did not. Jack nearly went blind with pain as the machete sunk into his right shoulder and opened him up as it was drug across
his chest. A hot, white flash consumed his field of vision as he screamed in the terrified agony. When his sight returned, he saw the machete raised above his head, ready to make its final stroke. In one desperate motion, Jack swung his left arm up and pulled the trigger on the magnum.

A bulky round tore through the arm of his attacker and the machete was released, but not quickly enough. The blade clanged into the side of Jack’s jaw and blinded him again. He clutched at his cheek with his hands before he could stop himself. His adrenaline had set every muscle in his body on fire and he opened his eyes again. He had let go of the magnum after the machete hit him and his life depended on picking it back up. He could not find it on the ground before the man was upon him again.

Human teeth sunk into Jack’s shoulder at the base of his neck while the two engaged in a combative embrace. Jack was leveled onto his back, and the brown man again was on top of him. In his blurred vision, Jack could see the man rip a knife from the side of his pants. Jack was barely conscious enough to taste the blood in his mouth. A survival instinct took over control of his body. With his last ounce of strength, he kneeled the brown man in the chest, infuriating him further. This provided room for Jack to place his boot on the man’s chest and propel him off of his body.

Jack rolled over and was greeted by his last resort. An unused M26 fragmentation grenade sat in a neat pile with extra M16 cartridges and a motion sensor. He pulled the pin without even thinking about it. Ten feet away, the VC had already gotten to his feet. He charged Jack, but there was ample time for the
American boy to regain his balance and sit up. The VC didn't see it coming as Jack lunged into his knees and he toppled over, somersaulting one and a half times afterward. Jack flicked the grenade into the ground behind him as hobbled to his feet and began a broken run down the trench. It was a short time before the explosion caught up to him.
Chapter 9

"Only the dead have seen the end of war."

-Plato

The phone call that reached the DeRonni house would have woken most people up, but it was customary for David DeRonni to be awake by 4:30 in the morning. He was pulling his boots on to venture out to his barn, where he would perform most of the morning chores for the farm. The ringing of the phone stopped his heart. He had dreaded certain news for weeks.

He picked up the phone with caution, his heart pounding. He identified himself as David DeRonni upon being asked, and his heart tried to escape his body. The man spoke solemnly and quickly to Mr. DeRonni, who thanked him and hung up the phone. He made his way into the bedroom, where he gently woke Mary DeRonni. He spoke softly to her and stroked her arm. She sat up quickly, and the two embraced tightly. Neither spoke for a very long time.

Mr. DeRonni returned to his clothes and finished dressing. Mrs. DeRonni was unable to sit still, so she got up and dressed herself as well. She accompanied David to the barn. The two got to work on the day’s chores, doing the only thing they knew they could. Their flight out of Lincoln was not until noon, and it was no more than a two-hour drive from Albion to the airport.

A few tense hours later, David and Mary DeRonni made the drive to Lincoln Airport. There was not much conversation in the car, but there was plenty of nail biting. The couple made their way into the airport, astounded by its grandeur and
size. They located gate 4B after passing through security measures. They approached the terminal without confidence or a sense of where they were going. Mrs. DeRonni spotted two men in military uniforms.

The DeRonnis met with their escorts and boarded the plane. Mary DeRonni had never flown before, but she was too preoccupied to take notice of her unfamiliar surroundings. After a sickening takeoff and the brutality of her sporadic ear pressure, Mrs. DeRonni simply stared out the window. David DeRonni read the paper to keep himself reserved. The flight was lengthy and uncomfortable for both of Jack’s parents, but the aircraft touched down safely in Washington, DC.

The military escorts proved very helpful and efficient in getting the couple out of the airport and into a car. Mary and David rode in the back seat, less thrilled to be in the nation’s capital than they had imagined. The traffic flowed like the last few drops in a jar of honey. The ride took over an hour, but eventually, they arrived at the front doors. The military personnel hopped out with haste to open the doors for their passengers. They wished the DeRonnis well, then slid back into their seats and drove away. Jack and Mary DeRonni stood at the bottom of a large, stone staircase and looked up. Above four gargantuan white pillars, proud letters read:

Walter Reed General Hospital

Mary DeRonni’s eyes moistened before they made it into the doors. A flood of military personnel welcomed the couple to the lobby. Mr. and Mrs. DeRonni gave their name to a receptionist, who grabbed a white binder and looked it up.

“Room 260,” she said with a smile. Her eyes pleaded with the DeRonnis to partake in her happiness.
David and Mary took the stairs to the second floor and followed the signs until they reached room 260. From outside the room, they could hear the sounds of the various medical devices operating. David and Mary DeRonni paused before entering and looked into each other’s eyes. David took his wife’s hand, and the two crossed the threshold into the room. On the bed lay their son, a white bandage wrapped around his forehead and a small pad of gauze affixed to his upper jaw. His face was clean, and his eyes were closed. Next to the bed, a heart monitor reassured Mr. and Mrs. DeRonni that their boy was alive.

David and Mary were so focused on their son that they didn’t notice the stoic man sitting by the door. He stood without a sound while they made their way to the side of Jack’s bed. He gave the two a moment to look at their son before speaking.

"Mr. and Mrs. DeRonni," he opened, as they looked his way, somewhat startled. “I am very glad you could make it. I am Major General (MG) Baron Seller, United States Army. I have been asked by the President of the United States to give this to you for Jack’s actions in the field of battle on August 14th, 1967.”

MG Seller presented an object in the middle of his enormous palm, and David DeRonni took it. He stared down at the heart-shaped medallion with a deep purple background. His gaze slowly crept its way back up to the tall military officer in front of him.

David DeRonni sniveled and asked, “And what were those actions?”

“Private DeRonni showed exemplary courage in an attempt to stave off an ambush by enemy forces on a United States Army base. He was wounded by explosive artillery.”
Mary DeRonni found the strength to vocalize her only question. “How badly wounded?”

MG Seller glanced at Jack over in the bed, as if taking a moment to figure out a euphemism for his injuries. He fed the DeRonnis more official summary language.

“Private DeRonni took a considerable amount of shrapnel to the back of his legs and buttocks, as well lacerations to the neck, face, and shoulder. He was taken to a military hospital in Vietnam, where he stayed nine days before being flown home. He was comatose for seven of those days, but has woken multiple times even just since arriving yesterday.”

“He’s awake? He’s been talking?” Mary DeRonni’s questions were anxious and fragile. She was afraid to believe the good news, having put so much effort into preparing for bad news.

“That’s what I’ve been told,” replied MG Seller, opening his hands with inward facing palms in an attempt at a welcoming gesture. “Mr. and Mrs. DeRonni, the President and the United States Army thank you. Your son is an American hero.”

With that, MG Seller shook David DeRonni’s hand and removed his hat in a gesture to Mary. He left the couple with their boy and departed from room 260. He held on to the bad news, because it was not a time for it. Mr. and Mrs. DeRonni would have to find out about Jack’s court martial another way.

It was a few hours before Jack woke up again. His eyelids rolled back to reveal the world to him again, but the hospital room was different this time. Two people sat at the end of his bed. He blinked a few times then squinted in order to identify them. He saw his mother and father and took in a sharp breath. His eyes
darted left and right without explanation before landing back on them. His gaze softened when his parents took notice of his consciousness. He looked at his father's face then his mother's before his jaw began to tremble. Mary and David DeRonni rushed over to hug their son, and all three Nebraskans cried for a short while. Jack's mouth turned upward into a rigid smile, where his bottom lip served as a cliff for his tears.

The family talked well into the night. While they spoke, Jack's parents were wise to avoid asking many questions about Vietnam. They did not dare ask about the events that had brought him home. Because of this, it was a great surprise to Mr. and Mrs. DeRonni when Jack brought it up himself.

"Mom, Dad, there's one thing I need to tell you," he began. He stared at the attentive faces of his parents, which beamed with relief at having a conversation with their son again. The fear of disappointing them almost confined him to silence, but he found the courage to speak. "Dad, you have always taught me that we must be responsible for our actions." David DeRonni's smile weakened a bit. Jack powered through. "I was already coming home when I got hurt," he explained. "I was scheduled for court martial." He paused before delivering the knockout punch, not for emphasis, but to gather himself again. "I shot someone. Accidentally. Someone who didn't deserve it." He needed another moment. "A Vietnamese civilian."

No one spoke for a long time. Mr. and Mrs. DeRonni were not smiling but were doing their best to avoid any telling expressions. Mary DeRonni finally succumbed to the silent tension.
"Oh, Jackie," was all she managed. She wanted an explanation more than anything, but knew it was far too much to ask of her son. She tried to take the conversation in a different direction. "Do you still have to go?"

Jack stared at the ridges at the end of the bed where his feet propped up the blanket. He could not face the speechless stares of his parents. He nodded without moving his eyes. "Tomorrow."

Jack’s parents made futile attempts at consoling him then settled for changing the subject to things completely unrelated to the war. They talked a short while longer before deciding that Jack still needed abundant rest. David and Mary DeRonni did what they could to get comfortable in the large visitors’ chairs, while Jack went back to sleep in his bed. The cot in Vietnam had made the stiff hospital bed seem divine to Jack. He closed his eyes, trying to reduce his apprehension for the following day.

The following afternoon, Jack was wheeled into Judiciary Square in Washington, DC. He had not walked for weeks, and the muscles in the back of his legs likely had permanent damage. The doctors at Walter Reed had recommended a gradual transition back to using his legs to combat the probable muscular atrophy from his extensive bandaging. Jack soon found himself sitting in the middle of an enormous room in front of a panel of four highly decorated military personnel and a judge outfitted in the customary black robe. The intimidating setup left him feeling powerless.

A man with gray hair and a square jaw sitting on the left side spoke first. "Private Jack DeRonni, you are hereby to undergo trial in the United States Army
court martial for your actions on August 9th outside An Khe, South Vietnam. The charges brought against you by CPT Stewart Hull of the United States Army include insubordination and manslaughter. Any questions?"

Jack pursed his lips and shook his head.

"Very well. Judge Harrison?" The man passed authority to the judge seated in the middle, who took over without hesitation.

"Private DeRonni, let me begin by presenting you with two bits of good news. The first is that you have made it home alive, and we are very happy to see you recovering today. The second is that your actions during the ambush attack of August 14th did not go unnoticed, and are much more important for our purposes."

Jack swallowed hard. He had no idea what to make of what the judge had just said, and silently begged him to keep talking. His plea was answered.

"After receiving the written investigation of your actions on August 9th there was extensive discussion as to your intent during the crime. After much review, we have determined that there is substantial evidence that your actions were not intentional and that the slaying of the Vietnamese civilian was not premeditated. While a case can be made for negligence, it seems that your culpability for the previously mentioned charges is doubtful. Do you have any comments on your actions?"

Jack prepared to shake his head again, but decided against it. His speech was barely audible, but he spilled the only thought on his mind.

"I'm sorry." His lip began to quiver.
There was no sympathy to be found on the judge’s face. He ignored Jack’s theatrical remorse and kept talking.

“In addition to the unlikelihood that you can be convicted on the previous charges, CPT Hull has made changes to his statement. It is his recommendation that the charges be dropped and he believes your defense can be found both in the psychosis of your company that night, a private Lucas Croppar, and unreasonably distressful conditions.”

Jack could not believe what he was hearing. CPT Crow, the man who nearly killed Jack with a detesting state, had vouched for him. Judge Harrison’s speech did not stop or wait for Jack to be stunned.

“After considering all things presented in this case, Private DeRonni,” Judge Harrison looked directly at Jack and burned holes in his cheekbones. “This court has decided upon your Honorable Discharge of Service from the Armed Forces of the United States.”

Jack could not find words until he was outside the courtroom. His parents met him just outside the doors. Before long, David DeRonni could not bear the suspense.

“Well?” He dared to ask.

“Nothing,” Jack said the words out loud to see if he believed them. “No charges.” He still didn’t believe what he was saying. “Let’s go home.”

Jack spent his life in search of normalcy. His injuries healed, but the muscular damage in his legs was extensive and limited Jack’s physical activities. He would marry and have children. He worked at his dream of higher education, and
eventually got a general studies degree at the University of Nebraska after several years of saving money. Jack worked for many years as an engineer for Union Pacific in Omaha, Nebraska. He owned land north of the city, where he lived with his wife and children. From an outside perspective, Jack was a happy man with a successful life.

The things that Jack did and saw as a 19-year-old kid in 1967 were things that were not easily forgotten. While Jack maintained somewhat normal relationships at work and home, there would always be a few live wires strung into his mind, cut and raw from his time overseas. It was no more than a year after his return to Nebraska that the hallucinations started. Jack was frequently visited by apparitions of straw-covered marksmen, bloodied rice farmers, or psychotic men hiding in the landscape around him. Only rarely did Jack turn to alcohol in times of distress, but the violence of the images became more vivid with intoxication.

Jack’s property of a few acres housed several ferocious guard dogs to alleviate his paranoia of an unseen intruder. He owned a handful of rifles, and on particularly bad nights, he walked his land equipped with a weapon and a military-grade night vision device. The heavy rains of Nebraska summers sometimes triggered an emotional volatility within Jack. Throughout his life, Jack struggled to live with these traumatic flare-ups. Ultimately, it was the love of his family that kept him going. Jack became a loving father and husband and a worked hard to provide for his family. He did his best to return to life in the United States, but his short time in a tropical country in Southeast Asia stayed with him - for only the dead have seen the end of war.
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First and foremost, I would like to thank Dr. Brent Blackwell, my thesis advisor. His advice and critiques were necessary to the integrity of the story. His literary background proved very helpful in maintaining sound composition practices throughout the completion of the writing.

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Lastly, I would like to thank my father, Mike Richardville, who is a Vietnam veteran. He provided encouragement and verified some details written about basic training and other military operations of the Vietnam era.
Author's Statement

I have written this story to serve as the best possible culmination of my Honors College curriculum. My objective when I began this work was to create something that appropriately captured my Honors curriculum experience. It was an opportunity to reflect on the things I learned in my courses. DEROs was created such that it took material from several separate Honors courses and tied it together in one piece of artwork.

A majority of the Honors courses I took throughout the last four years were philosophically based. Coming in as a student with no philosophical background, it was an entirely new type of curriculum for me. The courses challenged my beliefs, broadened my knowledge, and encouraged me to think critically about an array of concepts. I believe that the classroom experiences as an Honors student may be the most valuable thing the Honors College offered me. In a way, this project was also an opportunity to pay tribute to the ways the Honors courses benefited me.

For each of the philosophically focused Honors courses, a primary theme or two can be identified. I did my best to incorporate these themes within my story to represent the Honors courses I completed. The journey of the protagonist allows for the combination of these themes to make a story. With the assistance of this author's statement a reader can recognize where the themes occur.

My Honors 189 class included study of the concept of globalization. While most would argue that economic globalization can be beneficial to all countries, the political imposition by Western powers is reason for discontent in the Eastern hemisphere. America's military intervention in Vietnam is a perfect example of a
Western nation pushing its political philosophy and trying to prevent another (in this case, communism) from use. My Honors 199 course was a very significant reference from which this work was constructed. The course I took focused on American history in the “sixties era,” which was defined loosely as the time between 1958 to around 1974. It focused on the rise of the counterculture in the United States and the Civil Rights movement, while also including extensive study of the Vietnam War and other significant historical events. A defining characteristic of this era was the Americans’ lack of support for the Vietnam War. The dissent of the younger generation is represented both by Lucas Croppar, an unwilling participant in the war, and Giulia DeRonni, whose brief appearance makes it clear that she is a part of the counterculture.

The humanities courses (Honors 201, 202 and 203) involved the study and discussion of more abstract philosophical concepts. My Honors 201 course included readings of old classical literature, such as the Old Testament and The Iliad. The topics of Honors 201 were the basis for the plot movement in my story. In the 201 coursework, I learned the characteristics of the literary genre known as Epic. I have written DEROS to follow the plot structure of classical artworks such as the Iliad. The protagonist in an Epic work endures a fall caused by his or her own blindness, then goes through a time of adversity and reflection, thereafter achieving redemption. Jack’s blindness is represented by his lack of maturity during his service as a soldier. The deluge of rain that made it difficult to see on the night Jack shot a civilian was a slightly obvious allusion to blindness. The fall ensues after Jack murders the Vietnamese citizen, and his adversity and reflection occurs during his
six days in the camp waiting to go home for court martial. Jack matures in this time, which prepares him for his redemption as he fights off the ambush of the Vietcong.

An integral theme of my Honors 202 course was the concept of insanity. Discussion in the classroom involved trying to define insanity, and determining what conditions needed to be met for a person to be considered insane. The majority of the course reading was from Michael Cervantes’ *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, and much discussion took place in regard to whether a reader could consider Don Quixote to be insane. One point from the course I remember was that some would consider it insane to know something to be true but to act in a way that contradicts that truth. For example, if a soldier were to disagree with the reasons for which a war is being fought, but then fight and kill in the name of a cause in which he does not believe, the soldier could be considered insane. This concept is represented in a conversation between Lucas Croppar and Jules Weber. Lucas Croppar suggests that Jules Weber is insane because it seems obvious that the mission of their unit is futile or insignificant, but Jules Weber remains committed to it without any attempt at rationalization. Jack’s hallucinations and paranoia following the traumatic events at Vietnam are indicative of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, a psychological disorder that often makes its victims appear insane.

My Honors 203 course was focused on the concept of the human “self,” and what it is comprised of. The topics of the course included how to define the self, what embodies it, and what affects it. Humans often expend significant effort trying to reach an understanding of one’s self, whether it be their own or another person’s. The concept of the self is represented lightly in different places throughout the
story. One idea of the self is that is partially shaped by the way that others see us or the way that we wish to be seen by others. This is represented in Jack’s frequent concern with the impression he makes upon those around him. He thinks about being regarded as a “war hero,” or at another point is greatly distressed by the negative opinions towards him held by others in the base. Another idea of the self is that a person gradually becomes more familiar with the unique composition of his or her “self” while going through life. During Jack’s phase of contemplation and maturation following his errant slaying of the woman, he makes progress in understanding himself and the way he thinks. Lastly, another thing that I remember from the course is that the self is affected by nostalgia, which has the ability to be negative. Jack experiences negative nostalgia from the violent events of his time in Vietnam for his entire life. A permanent change is enacted upon Jack’s self by the Vietnam War, as he transforms from a young boy with political aspirations to a gun-shy veteran with different life plans.

The last courses that are integrated into the story were only lightly represented, and they are Honors 390F and 390B. Honors 390F was about the contributions to American society made by Theodore, Franklin D. and Eleanor Roosevelt. Many regard Franklin D. Roosevelt as one of the greatest presidents in American history, and his popularity remained strong in the nation for decades after his death. Jack’s admiration for FDR and dream of running for political office was a simple representation of how the president inspired the youth of the country in his era. Honors 390F was a movie course that studied the “Planet of the Apes” series. These movies were created as a means of social commentary and protest in the Civil
Rights era. Some of the issues that the films examined were the African American
Civil Rights movement and the increasing militarism of the United States. The Civil
Rights movement is referenced briefly when Giulia DeRonni mentions the riots
happening in Detroit and other major cities. The militarism of the United States is
clear in the intervention in Vietnam, an act that many Americans questioned the
necessity of. There are also a few instances where Jack has a moment of doubt, such
as when he wonders why exactly the United States has sent him and Dace to a jungle
to determine what the government of another country does.

In my writing of *DEROS*, I hope that I have captured the philosophical
cornerstones of my Honors curriculum. My time as an Honors student allowed for
my own maturation and philosophical growth. The Honors College provided me
with opportunities that would not have been available otherwise as well as
encouraging me to study topics that I otherwise would not have explored. This story
is a summarizing apotheosis of my Honors education and a tribute to the wonderful
experiences that accompanied my affiliation with the Ball State Honors College.