

CHAPTER 1

Unlike the soldiers in all the movies he had seen, David Whitehead had no weapon or helmet. He was in khakis, probably the only soldier not in olive green of some sort. He was in the coastal lowland region of Vietnam, getting combat pay and not knowing what to do to earn it.

After leaving Travis Air Force Base, he suffered through the longest ordeal of his life--a plane ride lasting seventeen hours with an hour stopover in Guam. There was also a drunken stopover in Hawaii, but he could only remember sitting near a palm tree. If you can't remember what went on, it doesn't count.

Sitting next to Whitehead on the plane was Ralph Cook, a not-so-young looking, dark-haired first lieutenant. Like Whitehead, Cook was assigned to the 228 Signal Company.

"When do we get to Guam?" Whitehead was trying to make conversation.

"In about six hours!"

Whitehead sat up and asked, "How do you know that? You seem pretty sure."

"I am. I was there a few years ago. Took some training there," Cook said with a yawn and a sigh. He rubbed his blue eyes and slapped his hollow cheeks, trying to sober up.

"How long have you been in the Army?" Whitehead asked after a few moments of silence.

Cook hedged a little and finally said he had been a civilian working for the government for a few years. He joined the Army only a year ago and went through OCS at Fort Gordon.

"I helped set that program up and taught there," said Whitehead. "Don't remember you. I thought I would recognize everyone who went through."

"I think I remember seeing your name," Cook replied, looking at Whitehead's name tag. "I didn't have you in class."

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"I guess that could happen."

Both men were only two of nine officers on the plane assigned to the 228 Signal Company in Nha Trang. No one knew anything about the unit or why it needed nine new officers. One of the other officers assigned to the company thought it was because the unit had seen heavy action and lost all its officers. No way, hoped Whitehead.

The night was clear. The temperature was near 60 degrees, nothing like the heat he felt all day. But the humidity was still oppressive.

Now in the city of Nha Trang, Whitehead could just barely remember the conversation coming out of Hawaii. He was trying to remember who paid the bill at the bar. Afraid to look in his wallet, he hoped it wasn't him.

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His mind took him back to Ton Son Nhut Air Base. Dawn. The Saigon sun was seeking to shine through a morning haze as Whitehead boarded an Air Force bus for the trip to Ben Hoa. Replacements arriving in-country went to Camp Alpha at nearby Ben Hoa for assignment to units up-country. Camp Alpha was not a shithole. It was a mud hole; the mud reached ankle level and just smelled like shit. Whitehead couldn't believe that this was an Army base of any sort, but it was.

After about three hours of whining to himself and others, Whitehead heard his name over a public address system.

He was perplexed about answering the call and how he would leave his two bags in the open for anyone to steal. Stealing was a popular past-time and was the first thing that everyone warned you about.

"Fuck it!" growled Whitehead. "Let'em take anything they want." Deep down, he hoped someone would steal his belongings. Maybe the Army would send him home to get

new clothes.

At a screened-in wooden box, Whitehead identified himself and was told to report back in thirty minutes. Back in only five minutes, he asked what was happening. The NCO at the public address system said someone was picking him up for assignment.

In another ten minutes, two lieutenants who looked vaguely familiar came to claim Whitehead. Looking them over closely, he recognized them from Fort Gordon.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't our old instructor from Fort Gordon! Look! He's a first lieutenant now. They'll promote anybody." Speaking was a tall blond officer from New York, John Gorshen, who was serving in the personnel section of the First Signal Brigade. "Couldn't let you rot in Camp Alpha. Meet George Connolly."

Gorshen and Connolly signed some paper, grabbed Whitehead's bags and led him to a well-washed jeep. After starting the jeep, Gorshen began driving with a recklessness that scared the shit out of Whitehead. Whipping past old shacks and rickety buildings, Gorshen's guided tour comments were lost in the wind. The muddy roads soon turned to asphalt of some sort and the buildings got better. They were less ugly now, but still dirty and decrepit.

The Vietnamese people walking in the streets seemed to ignore the swift moving jeeps. The old Poppa-sans called out obscenities when the jeep actually bumped them. Finally, the streets widened and the character of Saigon as a city started to appear. Sure enough, in true guidebook form, Connolly called Saigon "the Paris of the Orient." Perhaps the crowds, and the wide streets, and maybe the buildings, but not the smell.

"Do you guys smell something?" asked Whitehead.

"It's the food. Those little sidewalk stands and the restaurants give off that smell."

"On purpose?" Whitehead was asking seriously.

Both personnel officers laughed and promised

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Whitehead that he'd get use to it. In his mind, Whitehead was asking himself what could possibly happen to him that would enable him to get use to that smell.

The jeep suddenly slid to a stop in front of a building with the letters MACV underneath a red shield with a sword. "Military Assistance Command, Vietnam," was stenciled in black letters. Connolly leaned back and asked for a copy of Whitehead's orders. Taking a copy, he jumped out and headed for a door. Meantime, Gorshen threw the jeep into reverse.

"I'll take you to the villa," said Gorshen, flooring the pedal and taking the corner on less than four wheels.

Hanging on to the seat and edges of the jeep, Whitehead was getting self conscious about the fact he was the only person in a khaki uniform. He also was getting concerned about the VC. Where were they? Time Magazine, CBS, NBC, and ABC said they were all over Saigon, blowing up one building or another. In the mean time, Gorshen was driving like a New York City cab driver and bragging about avoiding the trouble spots. Only once did he stop for a few seconds at an intersection. There, Whitehead was propositioned twice, offered four wristwatches, and had one of his bags almost stolen.

The villa turned out to be a three-story house. It was clay colored and had shutters instead of windows. While telling Whitehead that it was built by the French, Gorshen took a bag and led Whitehead upstairs to a second story room which looked over the street. It was a very attractive room and, according to Gorshen, no one else would be sharing it with Whitehead.

Gorshen said to call the Momma-san if he needed anything and he would drop by later to discuss dinner.

"You'll be here a couple of days until we can secure some transportation for you to go up North," said Gorshen.

"What's the 228 like?" asked Whitehead.

"Who knows! I think every officer coming into the

country is assigned to the 228. Most never make it; they get sent to other units."

Whitehead asked about the other officers who came with him on the plane.

"They left already. They were all junior to you, except Cook. I don't know where he went; I think he had special orders." Gorshen seemed to know what he was talking about, leaving Whitehead with some uneasy feelings about his friend, Cook.

Shutting the door behind Gorshen's parting remarks, Whitehead surveyed the room. "So this is what war is like?" he mulled. He laid down on the bed and awoke the next morning at 7 am. "What happened to dinner?" he mumbled to himself.

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Three more days of waiting and eating, separated by walking tours, Saigon began to take on a vacation atmosphere. Then, that Wednesday, a bomb exploded just off To-do Street adding new meaning to the exotic nature of Saigon.

Whitehead had just entered a plaza and could see panic. People were running and crouching behind benches. He walked toward the center of activity, but stopped when he slipped on something wet. Catching himself, he looked down and saw the blood. Looking right he saw the body.

Repelled and sickened, he tried to wipe his sneaker clean. It wasn't working, so he gave up. Wanting to look again at the body, he held his breath, felt sick, and looked for the way home.

Moving quickly away from the area and back to the villa, Whitehead found his thoughts locked on the very real dangers of Saigon. He stood on the balcony of his room and looked down at the MP armed with an M16 in the cement bunker. His mind visualized how easy it would be for a cab loaded with explosives to run into the building and blow it up.

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He then had an explosion in his head; that's why this room is empty. It's the room that is most vulnerable. "I may be a dead man, just waiting to die."

Before he collapsed, a knock at the door produced Gorshen from personnel. "You're flying out in five hours. Get your shit together. I'll pick you up and deliver you to the air field."

Whitehead nodded and thought about throwing up. Too late. He had to get packed. "Fuck it!" he said to no one. It just seemed the right thing to say.

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At the airfield he got the initial flavor of the war. Everyone seemed to know what they were doing and ignored anyone who didn't.

Gorshen shook hands and wished him luck. Back in his jeep, Gorshen meshed the gears and stepped on it, out to make more deliveries Whitehead supposed.

"Drop and give me ten," the voice came out of nowhere. Whitehead reflexed into a bend at the waist but stopped when he remembered where he was. Turning, he saw Cook.

"Thought you had special orders," Whitehead said, more as a statement than a question.

"I do. How did you know that?"

Whitehead sensed he said the wrong thing. He responded vaguely that Gorshen or Connolly guessed he had. "What do I know!" joked Whitehead.

Cook changed the subject also. "We must be flying together. How do you rate this special treatment?"

"I thought I lost a lottery and got left with this shitass plane. I hope this isn't a special treat," moaned Whitehead.

"Listen-up everybody," shouted an Army pfc. Wearing a 45 Cal pistol under his arm in a shoulder holster, the GI was clearly in all his glory. "Grab a helmet and flak

jacket, and when you get out, leave them on the airplane. We have one stop, and then straight on to Nha Trang. Any questions?" He paused and looked around. "No? Well, enjoy your flight."

Picking up helmets and jackets, both Cook and Whitehead got in the plane. Whitehead put his jacket on and held the helmet on his lap.

Someone had stored the luggage in the back of the plane. Doors were shut, motor started, and prayers said. They were in the air in minutes.

The noise was terrible. No one could possibly talk. A passenger could see only the person to the left or right. The six passenger seats were in two single rows along the windows. Cook sat across from Whitehead. Whitehead looked over and smiled at how Cook was sitting on his flak jacket and had his helmet between his legs. But Cook was deep in thought, reading some hand written notes. Whitehead looked away and out the window and could see American troops moving over the countryside. He then put his head back and fell asleep.

Whitehead awoke with a punch from Cook.

"Do you like the way your balls work?" Cook shouted over the roar of the engine. "If I were you, I'd sit on the jacket. No one in the plane is going to shoot you. The VC don't have any airplanes. But Charlie can aim his captured rifle up in the air and shoot you right in the balls. That's how low we are." Cook's good deed done, he fell back on the seat and dozed.

Not one to ignore good advice, Whitehead pulled the jacket off and jammed it under him and put the helmet under his thighs in front of the seat. He then started to think about a gun. No, he meant a "rifle." A "gun" is a cannon, a howitzer. Nobody would give him a cannon. A rifle, maybe. Jesus Christ, give me something. He looked over to Cook. Where was his weapon? He was just about to ask him when he noticed the ankle holster on Cook's crossed leg. As each minute and hour went by, Cook seemed to be much more

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knowledgeable than his one year of service.

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From Saigon, Whitehead made several attempts to call the 228 Signal Company in Nha Trang. He only got through on the last attempt. He spoke to Norman Range, another lieutenant from Fort Gordon, who agreed to pick Whitehead up at the Long Van Air Base.

Rockets shot into the air. Flares in all colors also went up. Whitehead watched as the night sky filled with color wondering why Keyes never wrote about flares in the anthem.

Whitehead knew he had made a mistake coming to Vietnam. It began with ROTC. He had started out in the Air Force version, took the flight physical and passed it, but changed over to the Army because it required only two years of active duty.

At Rutgers, he majored in history and took education courses for teaching. But he wasn't really sure he wanted to teach. So he hedged with ROTC. He lived home in New Jersey and really couldn't face not going in service, or so he thought. As it turned out, no one in his family would have cared if he dodged the draft. He thought everyone was really patriotic. He only recently found out that the draft laws made everyone patriotic ex post facto. 4-F was good, too!

Like a lot of kids, he also listened to John Kennedy, not realizing he was a hero because he was a lousy navigator and a good swimmer.

It all worked out for awhile. He went to graduate school, got a masters and taught for a year. When he did go on active duty in 1965, he went to Fort Gordon for the officer basic course and then stayed to teach in that course and the new officer candidate school. They were looking for teachers and he was heading for Korea. A few questions and requests in what seemed the right places got Whitehead assigned to Fort Gordon. That reassignment eventually led to Vietnam.

So much for the right moves. If he had left his orders alone, he'd be at Camp Casey in Korea waiting to go home in six months. From here, he may go home in a body bag.

Everyone told him the Signal Corps doesn't get shot at. Maybe a mine or mortar by mistake. He wasn't sure that was an advantage. In any case, he was here and he'd make the best of it.

Whitehead's thoughts went back to Cook. Getting off the plane, he had simply slapped Whitehead's back, smiled, and said I'll see you around. Cook literally disappeared in the sea of green uniforms all over the terminal.

Waiting was always fun, especially at night in a strange country at war, without any weapons, and dressed in khakis. He was looking for a lieutenant he vaguely remembered and wasn't sure he'd be recognized. But then he did, "Norm."

"Dave, how're you doing? I see you found Nha Trang. Like it so far?" Norm Range was about 5 foot ten, average build, and walked on his toes. His long face was little leaner than Whitehead remembered. Whitehead estimated that Range was about twenty-two years old.

"Yeah, it's great," Whitehead said sarcastically and added, "What do you do for fun?"

Norm confirmed what Whitehead feared: "This place is one big shit hole, except you landed in one that's not as bad as others. Just hope you stay here. No one else has!"

"You mean all those guys who were on my orders are gone?"

"You bet! They've gone to places unknown. But you're a first lieutenant and we need one of them."

"I guess I should be happy. Why don't I feel that good?" asked Whitehead.

Norm changed subjects. "Let's get you settled in the villa; we have room. If you stay, you don't have to move. If they send you North, then kill a couple of days on the beach before the monsoons make it rough."

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"What is this place, Seaside Park?"

Norm was from New Jersey, too. From a town near Rutgers. Sayreville. He also went to Rutgers, graduating three years after Whitehead. All this convinced Whitehead that he would be moving on also. Nobody would put people with the same backgrounds together and let them feel comfortable in this country. Norm was also a second lieutenant, needing only a few months for his promotion.

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The company villa was a stucco bungalow without glass windows and surrounded completely by palm trees and an iron fence. A small Vietnamese teenager with a boy scout campaign hat opened the gate and waved Norm's jeep into a short driveway. He locked the gate and followed the two lieutenants onto the porch. Norm introduced the guard. He was one of many Vietnamese that Whitehead met that was named Nguyen.

Norm brought him to his room in the back and pointed to a bed and said sleep. It was ten-thirty at night, or 2230 hours. Norm said "good night." Neither officer had a warning that tomorrow would be a big day.