

DUSTOFF

A Young Man's Guide  
To The  
Surreality Of War

a novel by

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Dedication

For Zelma

And all the women who have loved a Vet.

You are the home we returned to.

You are the ones who brought us back.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

There were only about 1450 Dustoff pilots during the whole of the Vietnam War. Between them they flew an incredible 495,000 missions and saved 900,000 people, an average of more than 620 people saved by each pilot.

They flew unarmed helicopters. No machine guns, no cannons. They often flew with only half a tank of fuel because that allowed them 600 pounds more payload, four more guys they could rescue.

Almost 40 percent of the Dustoff pilots were killed or wounded. Their two man crews of Medic and Crew Chief suffered similar casualty rates.

Because of them, and the Doctors and Nurses at the Evac hospitals, 97.5% of wounded soldiers survived.

I am indebted to the many Dustoff pilots and crew who assisted me with this book. I would particularly like to thank Phil Marshall and Al Mytyk who became my technical advisors. Phil was a Dustoff pilot near the DMZ who was seriously wounded during a rescue. Al was a Dustoff crew chief who went on to become an Army UH-1 Maintenance Instructor and retired as a Master Sergeant. Everything in this book that is accurate about flying a helicopter is a result of these guys' efforts. Any mistakes are purely my own.

## CHAPTER 1

It started out as fun and involved a girl.

I was in the Army. It was my twentieth birthday. We were on a weekend pass before graduating from Snake School.

My best friend, Face, assured me we were going to get more than just lucky. We were going for quality.

After fourteen months of celibacy and six hours of drinking, I was more than ready.

Fourteen months of celibacy makes me sound much more experienced than explaining that I had finally lost my virginity while on leave after Basic. She was a nice girl who was one year ahead of me all through High School. She was very patriotic and knew I was going to end up in Vietnam.

Looking back, it was out of pity. But at the time it was real and it was sweet. This wasn't the first time she had been patriotic and she taught me a lot. Thankfully it was a real small town so her patriotism wasn't called on often. She was very kind. I won't embarrass each of us any further except to say, "Thank You."

Since then the Army had kept me pretty busy training to be a helicopter pilot. The

twenty-four hour leaves in the local towns allowed for competition with 5000 horn-dogs over a couple dozen locals, the majority at least semi-pro's. The kind of girls that Face predicted, "will someday have viruses named after them." Face was our secret weapon and my best friend since the fourth grade. Face could charm the pants off a nun.

Snake School was formally known as "AH-1G Cobra Transition." We were transitioning from slow, fat, wallowing Huey's to the fastest, baddest, helicopters in the sky.

The Cobra had a Fourteen Hundred Horsepower jet engine. It was about thirty-six inches wide. The pilot sat behind the co-pilot like in a fighter jet.

Cobras came screaming out of the sky at 219 miles an hour, and did so while firing four thousand rounds a minute mini guns. Four thousands rounds a minute equals sixty-six .30 caliber bullets each second. Every fifth bullet was a yellow tracer. All you could see was a steady stream of tracers. You didn't aim so much as walk the tracers to the target.

But wait, there's more. We also had a 40 mm grenade launcher on full auto. That was like throwing three hand grenades a second at a hundred miles an hour. You could thump out grenades to the front and both sides through a rotating turret. Very handy.

Then there were the closers, 2.75-inch wide, solid fuel rockets that traveled at 1,200 miles an hour. They were armed with a variety of high explosives, flechettes, and white phosphorous warheads.

If you're going to be in a fight, it's hard to beat a Cobra. Cobras beat tanks. Cobras beat everything. They were the winners in any kind of close combat.

We tried to act modest but it wasn't easy.

Getting into a Cobra required Basic Training, then Advance Infantry Training which was your fate if you failed out of the next intensive, and sadistic, nine months of helicopter school. The first ninety percent of Flight School was pure harassment.

Before the Army was going to give a 19 year old several million dollars worth of machinery they did everything possible to make us 'military', no matter how petty. Polishing floors with toothbrushes, six people screaming in your face at once. You've seen it in the movies. It was 24/7. I know some guys thought it tightened up their shit and made them better pilots. I personally thought it was all pretty pathetic but I also knew that I really wanted to fly.

To be perfectly honest, I also really, and I mean really, didn't want to be in the infantry in Vietnam. Everyone was going to Vietnam in 1970. Everyone that didn't go to college, graduate school, Canada or have the political connections to get into the Reserves or National Guard that is.

Our Basic class consisted of mostly minorities, rednecks and other folks, like Face and myself, who wanted to learn skills they couldn't afford in civilian life.

They tried to scare us in helicopter school that one in three wouldn't be coming back. This was from guys that were in Vietnam in '67 and '68. By the time we were in flight school it had been decided that we would be rapidly turning things over to the Vietnamese. President Nixon and Kissinger called it Vietnamization. Things would be winding down by the time we got there.

Besides, both Face and I were in the top 10% of flight school. We were better than 90% of those other guys and we were in Cobras. We figured the odds were in our

favor.

I wanted to fly all of my life. Face and I took pilot lessons when we were 16. We had both had private pilot's licenses before we joined up. The cost of further training in instruments and multi-engines was more than we could afford.

We were going to be airline pilots. They traveled all over the world, got lots of girls and made great money. At eighteen that seemed like a fair trade for a few years in the Army.

Face and I are like brothers. I've known him since the fourth grade. I lived with his family from the time I was 12. My folks died in a car crash and Face's folks took me in. Betty and Jake treated us both the same. Face was always cool about it. Face's real name is Francis but no one has called him that since we started chasing girls.

The lottery told me I was going to be drafted anyway and the Air Force and Navy required a college degree for flight training. Face's lottery number was borderline. We lived in a boring little farm town in Illinois, which is the reason Face gave for going in with me.

Face and I went in on the buddy plan. Since we both had pilot's licenses the recruiter said fixed wings would be our natural path. No one in our training class went to fixed wings. The Army only needed helicopter pilots.

They were surprised that we were surprised. We were asked if, "we got it in writing," which of course we hadn't. I doubt that would have made a difference to the Army anyway. They probably would have just torn up the paper. Or given it to some clerk to have it magically disappear.

They made it very clear that they owned our asses and we had already passed Advanced Infantry Training. The Army was never big on subtlety but they were effective. We lined up for helicopter school.

Flying helicopters was still flying, even if they had none of the grace or ability of a real airplane. In an airplane if something happens to your engine you coast in for a landing. In a helicopter you plummet from the sky. Planes are made to fly, to soar like a bird. Helicopters aren't.

Helicopters have a giant engine that not only spins the blade but also tries to torque the whole aircraft into a death spin. The amount of this torque has to be perfectly counterbalanced with each change of wind, or direction, or altitude, or speed. At least five powerful forces, each pulling in different directions. None of them will keep you in the sky on its own. Any one could send you to your death.

The only thing keeping you up was the centrifugal force of the rotor blades. If the blades stop turning they are nowhere near strong enough to hold you up. They fold like straws and you plummet to your death.

Helicopters have about three thousand moving parts. Each one fighting the others. Each one capable of the afore mentioned plummeting. Each part of each helicopter built by the lowest bidder.

It took me and Face a while to warm up to helicopters. We called them Plummetcopters for the first few months, but only to each other.

Even though the war was "winding down" people were still getting killed. Worse, they were still getting crippled and maimed by the dozens. We decided that if we were

gonna' go, we wanted a quick explosion in a ball of flames. Spending months at a time wading through swamps waiting for a booby trap to cripple you for life seemed less attractive.

Face and I made a pact that we wouldn't let each other come home crippled. Death before wheelchairs. We swore on my mother's grave. I know a lot of people use that as a figure of speech. We did it for real. Graveside at midnight under a full moon. Did the blood brothers thing first. We were serious. We were also seriously drunk. We still meant it when we sobered up.

I buckled down enough to get in the top ten percent of my class, Face made top 5.

We had all our Cobra check rides complete and would be graduating the following weekend. Then it was 30 days at home before Vietnam.

Face was going to get me a "nice girl" for my birthday. Face always was offering to get me girls but I thought there was some things a man should just do for himself, at least the first time. Now that I was past the first time, and the second time had been a long time not coming, I had a much more flexible attitude.

I was becoming increasingly flexible as the afternoon drinking extended into the evening. We didn't want to waste our money on food.

It was Face's idea to rent a car and travel away from the base to some classy place where we could meet, "Sophisticated women who weren't pro's." We were both way too cool to have to pay for it. Actually Face was way too cool and I was way too scared.

We traveled about twenty miles and the best we could come up with was a Holiday

Inn. We rented separate rooms based entirely on our faith in Face. There was a lounge band that started at eight which somehow failed to draw in hordes of sophisticated women. The band played country rock.

They did attract a few women of the big hair variety but they were looking a bit old. They were in their thirties and forties. “Ex-wives with tattoos,” according to Face. They checked out Face a lot. A few even sent over drinks.

All I wanted was a girl who was pretty and willing and not old enough to be my mother. After the fourth drink I was looking for a willing girl who was almost pretty but I still clung to the same generation rule. I was about to waive pretty all together when she walked into the bar with her friend.

She was even better looking than my fantasies. Teased out hair, lovely face with just a touch too much make-up, silk blouse, short skirt, long legs, high heels on knee high boots and a Playboy body. Think, “Slutty Barbie.” Worked for me, big time.

Her friend dressed from the same catalog but didn’t pull it off quite as well.

They said were they Stewardesses for Pan Am. We told them we were pilots. I thought it strange that a Pan Am Stew would be based in the middle of Mississippi but who am I to puncture a woman’s fantasy?

They might have gotten the idea that we were pilots for United rather than the United States. We were pleased to find out they had been drinking before they arrived. We laughed at each other’s lies.

Usually Face got the alpha female and I got the girlfriend. I called on my birthday gift while the girls held their conference in the ladies room. Both groups arrived at the

same conclusion and we paired off over several more rounds of drinks.

The fact that we already had rooms impressed the girls. After a few more rounds, and another conference in the ladies room, the girls decided they would like to check out the view from our rooms. It was a two-storey motel.

She told me her name was Connie. I told her everyone called me Mac, which with a name like John Mack is closer to the truth than most of the lies I told that night. The Army had been calling me by my last name for over a year. Even Face called me Mack now.

Connie and I had 6 hours of mutual fantasy fulfillment. What we lacked in experience was more than compensated for by sincere enthusiasm and what President Kennedy would call, “youthful vigor.” Everyone went home happy, very happy.

She gave me her phone number and wrote her name with a little heart over the i. She put 5 stars next to her name, “So you won’t forget me.” Connie, darling, wherever you are, I can assure you I haven’t forgotten.

## CHAPTER 2

I called Connie mid-week, both to be polite and to tell her that my morning pee felt like someone had shoved a burning wire up my penis.

I told her how I had been very cool with the Doc. Told him I just knew her name as Jane. I told him we met in a local park so they wouldn't place the bar off limits. He didn't seem particularly shocked.

The Doc told me he'd keep it off my record. "No sense staining a budding career," was how he put it. My gonorrhea became "non-specific urethritis."

The way he said it you expected background music. He was a believer even though he was just in for three to work off the school loan.

The idea of becoming a lifer was scarier than the upcoming trip to Vietnam. I didn't laugh and nodded sagely. He gave me a 10-day supply of penicillin pills.

I also received a lecture on using rubbers, particularly in Vietnam. He repeated the Hygiene lecture he had given our whole class weeks before. Vietnam had more VD than VC. They had types of VD that we never heard of in the States. One kind could make your dick fall off. There were guys that they wouldn't let come home because of the

diseases they carried. They were kept in a place off the coast called Black Island, their families were told they were dead. A lot of the prostitutes were Commies and they put razor blades up their pussies that cut your dick in half. I think they were trying to scare us. It worked for me.

I knew the responsible thing to do was tell Connie so she could get treatment. I tried to be a grown-up and not pissed off that she had done this to me.

Connie wasn't as cool as I remembered. I had to point out that my enforced celibacy made it not my fault. I wasn't as cool as I remembered either. I have since found out that this is a common side effect of alcohol-fueled sex.

Connie was not impressed with my smooth handling of the situation. She started babbling about her church choir, her father, her high school and "damn Billy."

High School? Stewardesses don't go to high school! Hysterical screaming followed, some of it her's.

### CHAPTER 3

Two days later, just as the doc's pills are beginning to work and I can almost pee without screaming, I was ordered to the CO's office.

This is hardly ever a good sign. Usually it meant that you had washed out of flight school. Far from getting you out of going to Vietnam, it meant you were going as a grunt. A live in the mud with leeches and foot sores type of existence.

The best it could mean was someone in your family died and you might get a bereavement leave. I should have realized that life was getting pretty strange when a death in the family is your best option. Since all my family were dead already and I had already passed all the requirements for Snake School, I was left in the dark.

I tried to ignore the little voice that said this could be about getting the clap. Maybe the Doc ratted me out on the VD and I was going to have to watch the hygiene film again.

My CO was seriously pissed-off. The Commanding Officer of the base, a General, was seriously pissed off and wanted me to report immediately. I wasn't sure why. My CO wasn't sure either. That's why he was so pissed.

The Army has hundreds of wonderful old sayings for every occasion. This one is, “Shit flows downhill through the ranks.” Generals made their displeasure known to Colonels, who spoke harshly to Majors and Captains, who gave strict orders to Lieutenants, who barked at Sergeants, who screamed at enlisted men. The chain of command was more of a poop chute.

I had been ordered to report to the Commanding General of the whole damn base. Deep shit but no details.

I was escorted to the General’s office. Delivered in the CO’s jeep.

The muscles in the General’s Aide’s face fought each other as he did his best to suppress a smile. He escorted me to the office door, ignoring my whispered, “What’s going on?” He knocked on the door.

The reply was more a bark than a word. I pulled myself together as the door opened.

I came out of the chute and snapped my tightest salute, “Warrant Officer Second Mack, reporting as ordered, Sir.”

I was surprised to see the Doc standing to one side.

The General looked to the Doc. The Doc nodded and left the room.

I held the salute. The General continued to sit at his desk. His eyes looked at me and then at a folder on his desk. He didn’t return my salute. The rules were that I couldn’t move until he did.

I kept my eyes locked on the wall behind him, gathering information with the excellent peripheral vision required of all pilots. The top of his bald head was a reddish

purple color. At first I thought he was having a stroke. His breathing was labored. His right leg was tapping rapidly against the floor, causing half his body to bounce. Each exhale was a loud snort.

My eyes wandered a fraction. His arm was at an odd angle. I noticed it was because his white knuckled hands were squeezing the grip of his holstered .45. I had never seen a desk officer wear a side arm.

He looked up at me. My eyes locked back on the wall. He exhaled in snorts as he looked me up and down. I was still holding the salute, muscles locked rigidly in place. The memory of a viscous Rottweiler told me not to look him in the eyes.

I could tell the General wasn't ready to talk. He continued to stare. I held the salute, locked rigid.

He got up slowly. Walked around the desk. He stopped behind me. I heard the .45 get racked back, then slam shut, a round in the chamber. Ready to go.

The framed picture on his desk caught my eye. I almost didn't recognize the General smiling. He was standing behind a 20th Anniversary cake with an attractive older woman. There was also a pretty girl who looked young and wholesome. Without the make-up and the teased up hair it took me a second to recognize Connie.

I felt the muzzle of the pistol against the base of my skull.

“Do you know how long you'll rot in Leavenworth for raping a fifteen year old girl?”

Rape? Hold on there buddy. I'm no rapist. She was willing. More than willing. She woke me up twice out of a sound sleep willing. I sensed he wasn't quite ready to hear

this.

That's when the 15-year-old part sunk in. In Mississippi cousins have been known to marry from the age of 12. I wasn't sure what Mississippi's age of consent was. I wasn't even sure what the Army's age of consent was. I was fairly positive the General's view was that it was over 15. I also realized it was one of those rhetorical questions. I couldn't talk until he returned my salute.

I was afraid if I moved a muscle, the .45 would blow my brains out. I tried to remember all the cool moves they showed us in Basic for disarming the enemy. There was no "gun in the back of your head move".

If I moved really, really fast I might be able to get shot in the side of my head. A .45 makes a pretty big hole so it wouldn't be much of an improvement.

I braced myself for the shot. Hard to say how much time passed. All my energy was focused on trying to hear the click of the trigger release. My past, my fantasy future, for a moment everything flooded through my body.

I thought fast and hard. I didn't think he'd shoot me in his office. It would be hard to justify shooting me in the back of the head. I had a feeling he was trying to come up with a good story right now. If he did, he'd probably get away with it.

I was thinking very clearly. I wasn't sure if he was.

Then I thought of my parents, and looked forward to being with them again. I remembered a day we all spent at the beach. For a second, I was more there than in the General's office.

All of a sudden I heard the hammer fall with a sharp "Click." I was sure he had

fired the gun. I didn't think I'd hear it and I remember wondering if I would actually see my brains hit the wall before I died.

Every muscle in my body clenched tight. Everything stopped for a moment. I felt myself starting to pee my pants but the pain made me cut it off.

There was no deafening roar. I checked the wall for blood splatter. My brains were still inside my head. He had dry fired the gun. I heard him rack the slide back again and heard the breech slam shut again. I was pretty sure there was a round in the chamber this time.

I felt him lean in behind me. I could feel him close. Reflexes jumped when he sniffed me. Sniffed me? He smelled me like a big dog smelling shit.

I kept my eyes on the point on the wall as the general walked slowly back to his chair. I'm trying to give him nothing to respond to. The .45 is hanging stiffly at his side, ready faster than the speed of thought.

He kept walking slowly to the other side of the desk. He stood with his back turned, pistol at his side, inviting attack.

It is hard to tell how long this lasted. General Connie's Daddy seemed to be waiting, for some sound, for some movement, for any reason to whirl and strike.

"Get out of my sight. Pick your orders up from Billie on the way out. Dismissed." He said it so softly I wasn't sure if I heard it right.

'Pick your orders up from Billie on the way out.' I had to wonder if this was "damn Billie" who caused the whole problem in the first place.

I wasn't sure if I should move or not. I knew he was looking for a reason, any

reason.

I decide to get my back to him as quickly as possible. Still betting he hadn't come up with a good, "I had to shoot him in the back" story. I snapped around and marched to the door. My back muscles stiffened without thinking, preparing for impact. I could feel my brain generate a whole new level of awareness as it braced for damage.

The door provided relief, mixed with the awareness that this was his last chance to resolve any lingering doubts.

I opened the door, relieved to see witnesses in the outer office. I still expected slugs to tear through the door, witnesses be damned.

One look in his eyes and I knew the Aide was "damn Billie". He smiled as he handed me my orders. "Your plane to Nam leaves in 25 minutes. Miss it and you will be tried as a deserter." He presented my orders with a flourish.

## CHAPTER 4

Needless to say, they weren't helpful getting me to the airport. The base bus left without me. There was no time to get my gear. All I had was \$20 in my wallet and my little bottle of penicillin pills in my pocket. I had to run a mile and a half to the highway. I flagged down a half dozen cars before one stopped. I arrived with three minutes to spare.

The plane terminal was full of young soldiers and their families. Moms in tears. Lovers cling together.

I was able to make a quick call to Face's folks to tell them my orders had gotten screwed up but I loved them and would be home before they knew it. I left out the part about VD and the crazed General.

I wanted to call Face but I knew that he'd at the Graduation Ceremony.

Officers, Majors and above, got on the plane first, then Captains and Lieutenants. Warrant Officers got on before Sergeants, then the rest of the enlisted men.

Officers sat up front. I was relieved that my orders showed that I was still a Warrant Officer and a qualified Cobra pilot. The General had missed a trick.

I was grateful that they served alcohol to Officers. From the noise in the back of

the plane it seemed some enlisted brought their own. What were they going to do, send them to Vietnam?

The stewardesses were all blonde. They were also some of the oldest stews I ever saw. This was back when it was a job requirement for all stewardesses to be young and pretty. These were their mothers. Some were 40 easy with a few pushing 50. They got younger and prettier as the flight went on.

They had divided the plane so they each had 60 or so admirers. They traveled in pairs whenever possible. They averaged about 4 proposals each. They were incredibly patient with some real assholes. They seemed nicest to pilots and grunts. Pity pats. They knew things we didn't want to think about. I was too busy getting drunk to be a bother.

I actually felt a bit sorry for the General if this was his best shot. I was going to Nam anyway. He screwed me out of 30 days leave but big deal. I was just going to run around with Face, get drunk and maybe visit my patriotic friend. I was still a Cobra pilot. I'd just get home 30 days earlier.

The steady whine of the jet engines slowed as we approached the coastline. The boys trying to be men, myself included, got real quiet as the plane descended.

The pretty stewardess, with the pretty smiles and 200 guys hitting on them, popped open the cabin door. Heat and humidity immediately flooded the plane.

## CHAPTER 5

First thing everybody notices about Vietnam is the humidity. You walk off the airplane onto a different planet. I was aware of moving through, almost swimming through, the air. I never felt that at home.

Next thing everyone does is double check the date and compare it to the DEROS date on their orders. DEROS, pronounced “DEE ROWS” is the Date of Expected Return from Overseas. Everybody had a 365-day tour of Vietnam. Only the Military would call a year in Vietnam a tour.

Everyone in Vietnam knew their DEROS. Everyone knew exactly how many days they had left.

The sweating starts immediately. I was soaking wet by the time I hit the bottom of the stairs.

Helicopters buzzed constantly. Up, down, and around the airport. Jets took off every few seconds. Huge Chinook choppers moved wrecked helicopters slung under their bellies.

Closer to the ground the helicopters were mimicked by dragonflies hovering

everywhere.

The sun was intense. The sweat made everything cling to my body. My underwear and outerwear were soaked within a minute and a half. If you have ever had to walk around in soaking wet clothes then you know what I mean. I tried to walk so as not to touch my clothes.

There is a Spec4 at the bottom of the stairs yelling, "Officers follow the Red Lines. Enlisted, Blue Line to the Right." Spec4's are equal to corporals in rank and pay. Corporals were being phased out. Spec was short for Specialist. The Army was looking to a high tech future that would require Specialists. They defined the term loosely.

The painted lines on the tarmac guide us past these guys that all seem so much older, and leaner and more serious and tired than we were.

"FNG's! I'm going home on that bird, motherfuckers!," one of them yelled.

This seemed to really brighten up the old guys. They all cheered. Somehow us arriving made them even happier to be going home. Like we were in for this really big joke that was going to be on us. Maybe they were just happy their flight home was right in front of them. Probably a bit of both.

I'm sure some ancient philosopher has philosophized on this point but I was pretty sure these guys weren't philosophers. You can tell.

The Red and Blue lines, assisted by Spec4's with clipboards herding us along on at regular intervals, led to adjoining quonset huts where our civvies were packed and our jungle boots and fatigues and web belt and canteens and all the basic GI Joe gear, except weapons, were custom fitted to each individual in approximately 17 seconds by

Specialists. The results reflected the effort.

After that we were assigned to one of the companies of the 90<sup>th</sup> Replacement Battalion for in-country briefings, processing and assignments.

The 90<sup>th</sup> was located in Long Binh, a giant Army Base that spread for miles. It was a 20-minute bus ride from the airport. The buses didn't have glass windows. The welded wire mesh was supposed to keep out hand grenades from discontented locals.

## Chapter 6

Most of the Warrant Officers going through the 90<sup>th</sup> Replacement got out in a few days. Most were getting assigned to posts around Saigon and the Delta where we were told the living, and the women, were easy.

Vung Tau, a French Colonial seaside resort was the jackpot. There was supposed to be an unacknowledged, but years long, understanding that Vung Tau was an in-country R&R Center for both sides. Nothing exploded in Vung Tau.

Each day we would line up for morning formation. Names would be called and orders handed out. Each day there were a dozen or so new guys who had another day of processing to go. About half a dozen were called out each day to supervise enlisted men filling sand bags, or unloading supplies and such.

As Warrant Officers we didn't have to actually work, just supervise and sign the form at the end of the day. Each day, the Army trying to appear fair, the names were chosen alphabetically A-M or M-Z. I made the list everyday. And I was always first on the list.

I also always got the same job. Thousands of guys are on this base and hundreds

more pass through every day. To put it crudely, this generates a lot of shit. I'm not talking the usual Army bullshit but the real excrement.

The Army decided the best way to handle all this was to build hundreds of six-hole outhouses. They sawed thousands of 55-gallon drums in half and put one under each hole. This from a country that just put a man on the moon.

Every day some lowly enlisted men had to drag each half drum out, cover the contents with diesel fuel and then I, as the supervising Warrant Officer, would check that it was sufficiently full of fuel, sign off on a numbered form and then light the contents on fire.

I recognized the long arm of the General on the second day. On the third day, instead of just signing off at the end of the day, I had to sign off on each outhouse. A few days later I had to sign off on each can. About a week after that I had to sign off that the can was properly filled with diesel and then sign off that it was burned. A few days later I also had to keep track of how much diesel we used in each can. After three weeks the joke was getting a little old. That quaint Army phrase, "being fucked up the butt without using any Vaseline" came to mind.

I told myself that this still counted as time in country. It was part of my 365 days and no one was shooting at me. But I was a Cobra pilot. A gunfighter. Definitely not a shit shoveler. I didn't care where they assigned me. I just wanted to fly. Not be covered in flies.

"Looks like they finally found something that suits your talents."

I spun around to find Face grinning like a goof. He lifted a little camera and

snapped my picture surrounded by cans of burning shit. I ran over and hugged him.

“Jesus Mack, you reek.”

“Good to see you too. Aren’t you like a week early?”

“It was boring without you.”

“How’s your Mom and Dad?”

“Worried about you.”

“I wrote them when I first got here.”

“They send their love.”

“Me too. You just get in?”

“Coupla’ days ago, Got my orders, leave tomorrow.”

“Where?”

“Somewhere South. We fly escort for V.I.P.’s.”

“You’re in Vung Tau, aren’t you?”

His big grin said it all.

“You lucky bastard.”

“I’ll get down there, make a few deals, get a few Officers laid and I’ll have you there in no time.”

“I don’t think General Connie’s Daddy is going to let that happen.”

“Don’t worry. Remember, the Face delivers.”

“You want to hang out while I finish this?”

“Hell no. I’m going to the Officers’ Club for a beer.”

“See you there later.”

“Try to smell better.”

Face and I got roaring drunk that night.

Face gave me a couple hundred dollars to tide me over until I got paid. No one got paid until they got to their assigned units. I had spent the last few weeks with no money to go to the Officer's Club or even buy a can of beer from the Post Exchange which is Army for a huge supermarket type store that sold everything from food to stereos. You could even buy a new car to be waiting for you when you got home.

Face and I didn't loan each other money. We gave what we had when it was needed and never kept track.

Evidently the whole thing with General Connie's Daddy had spread through our Snake Class within hours and had become an instant legend. He thought it was a lot funnier than I did.

I think Face really did come a week early because he missed me. He also told me how freaked out he got when his fourth old girl friend in two weeks proposed marriage. He was terrified of the idea of being with only one woman for the rest of his life. He convinced himself that one of these girls was going to get pregnant on purpose. He told me the one time he did have sex that he actually wore three rubbers just to be sure. Even then he was worried.

We went through every old story since fourth grade. We laughed about our high school that was so small that everyone who tried out made the football team. We went through all the games where I was the skinniest guard in the league blocking for Face, our star halfback. We were always the worst team in the league. The town still turned out for

our games because there was nothing else to do.

We knew it might be the last time we saw each other. We didn't talk about that.

## CHAPTER 7

There was another week of shit burning before I was ordered to report to the Commanding Officer of the Replacement Battalion, widely known as Colonel Twitch because of an unfortunate facial tic. I was ordered right from morning roll call. I was thinking maybe my meticulous record keeping from the burning detail was maybe leading to a headquarters job. Yeah, right.

Colonel Twitch was sharing a good laugh with someone in his office when I reported to his clerk. I took this as a good sign.

The laughter stopped when the clerk knocked and opened the office door. I flashed back to Candidate training and reported in ramrod straight and proper, my salute crisp. I was willing to play Army to get out of the shit. I was a Cobra Pilot.

Two Officers were sitting across from the Colonel's desk. They all looked me over for a few seconds before the Colonel ordered me, "At Ease." Contrary to how it sounds, "At Ease" is in reality another form of Attention, this time with your hands clasped tightly behind the small of your back.

"Warrant Officer Mack, this is Major Allison and Captain Richards. I'll leave you

gentlemen to it.” With that the Colonel left the room.

The Major got out of one of the chairs and took the Colonel’s seat behind the desk. The Major wore a 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne patch and Helicopter Pilot wings. Finally I was going to get to fly.

The Major opened a personnel file on the desk that had my name on it. He leafed through a few pages and looked up at me. “This is Captain Richards,” he said, nodding to the officer still seated. I noticed the Major came from the Deep South. “Captain Richards is with CID.”

Oh, fuck. I had extremely underestimated General Connie’s Daddy. CID was the Army’s Criminal Investigation Division. One of the first things they brief you on when you arrive in Viet Nam is LBJ. To most Americans LBJ was a big-eared Texas politician who became President when Kennedy was killed. To a soldier in Nam, LBJ was the Long Binh Jail.

The Army, needing to maintain control at all times, had created a prison in the middle of its biggest Army base. It was their answer to, “What are you gonna’ do, send me to Vietnam?”

The prison was as big as a city block. It had 20 feet high fences covered with canvas so no one could see in or out. There were rolls of razor wire on top and guard towers with orders to shoot to kill.

The worst thing about LBJ is that any time you spent in the prison did not count as part of your 365. You did your time in jail and then you finished your time in war. I was going to be the last man out of Vietnam no matter how long we were here.

I had a sudden urge to throw up that I barely fought down.

“We’ve been going over your records, Mack. Both the official and some personal reports from the Commander of your training base,” the Major said. He was a little chubby for a helicopter pilot. His fatigues were faded so he had been in country awhile. His brow furrowed as he clearly showed how little he thought of me. What a disgusting, revolting, creature I must be to rape a nice 15-year-old girl.

The reference to General Connie’s Daddy wasn’t lost on me. I was totally and utterly screwed. I had a vision of twenty years in LBJ and then a year as an infantry grunt. Life was looking like a shit sandwich.

“Are you a Christian, Mack?”

This was not a question I expected. My records were right in front of him. They said I was a Catholic even though I had kind of stopped going when my folks died. I was in for a morality lecture as well as a jail sentence.

“Yes, sir.”

“That’s mighty fine. Do you believe in redemption?”

Again a question I wasn’t expecting. I really hadn’t given it a lot of thought but I got the feeling I should roll with it. “Yes, sir.”

“Well that’s mighty fine. When I look at your record here, I see a man in need of redemption.”

I didn’t know where this was going but I was ready to sing in the choir, get baptized again and would probably have agreed to be re-circumcised to stay out of LBJ.

“Yes sir.”

“Captain Richards and I have a problem that you might be able to help us with.”

Okay, as long as I wasn't confessing to rape. “Yes, sir.”

The Captain stood and walked to the side of the desk. “Last week an Airmobile Battalion discovered a Viet Cong hospital a few miles outside of An Khe.”

I had no idea what this had to do with me.

“By the time they got there,” the Captain continued, “The damn gooks had all run away. We didn't miss them by much and they left a lot of stuff behind.”

Still no idea where this was going.

“Some of that stuff was U.S. Army medicine and supplies.”

The Major broke in. “Some bastards have been black marketing medicine to the damn enemy. What kind of man would do that, Mack?”

Not me. I've been here shoveling shit the whole time. The idea of it still pissed me off. “A damn traitor, sir,” I replied.

“Damn right, Mack. And we have a pretty good idea of who they might be. A bunch of cowboys who seem to have forgotten they are in the United States Army. A bunch of assholes who care more about money than seeing their own men killed. What do you think we should do with men like that?”

“They should be shot, sir.” I meant it.

“Well son, we plan to lock them away for a long time with your help.”

I'd gone from Mack to son and no one had talked about putting me in prison forever. Things were looking up. “What can I do, sir?”

“The men we're looking at are part of a helicopter crew. We want to put you onto

their Huey to get the goods on them. Can you do that for us son?"

Shit, a fat, wallowing Huey. "The Army spent a lot of money training me as a Snake pilot, Sir. I don't know anything about investigations."

Now it was the Captains turn. "We just need you to keep your eyes and ears open and tell us what you find out. You'll report everything to Major Allison here. Only he and I will know your true mission."

"This could be your redemption, son," the Major added.

"I have to warn you that this is not without risk," the Captain added. "The last two men we sent in were killed, supposedly in combat. We can't order you to do this, but..."

He just let the but hang out there. I knew it was actually my butt he was hanging out there. The choice seemed to be to infiltrate a gang that sold our supplies to the enemy and murdered our own men or 20 years in prison and then be the oldest living grunt trying to get through a year of slogging through swamps. The choice seemed easy at the time.

"When this is over can I get back in Cobras, Sir?"

"I don't see why not."

"I'm your man, Sir."

"Mighty fine."

The deal was done. Probably so was I.

A little voice told me I should have gotten it in writing.

## CHAPTER 8

The next day I was in the back of a C-130 cargo plane with orders to I Corp and the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne. I Corp, pronounced “Eye Core,” was one of four zones that the Army had created in Vietnam. They always used Roman Numerals. I have no idea why. Probably made it look like they were more serious. Maybe they were going for biblical.

The weird thing was all the other corps, though written in Roman Numerals, were called 2, 3 and 4 Corp in conversation. Only the first one was called I Corp.

I Corp was the Northern most region. It bordered the DMZ and Laos and unlike the other three Corps, the war was still hot and heavy there.

On the flight up I tried to console myself with the thought that the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne was generally considered to be only about the fourth most gung-ho psychos in all the armed services. Of course they would gladly fight you for the honor of being named most psycho.

Just in case you’re wondering about the Official Order. First were the Seals and the Green Berets and Delta and all those guy who weren’t supposed to exist. Next came the LRRP’s, pronounced Lurp’s. Long Range Reconnaissance Patrols. Five or six guys

off in the jungle by themselves for weeks at a time. Their game was to see how close they could get to Charlie without being seen. I mean like ten feet close to see how much ammo a VC Battalion has on hand, if they were short on rice. If they were seen, or heard, or smelled, they were usually outnumbered by about a hundred to one and killed. They loved the game.

Third, but in denial about it, were the Marines. Every Marine thought he was John Wayne. Marines thought air strikes and artillery were for pussies. Rather than blow up an enemy machine gun nest from a distance, they would rather have a platoon charge up the hill.

Airborne would send in a helicopter full of guys who after Advanced Infantry Training went to still more harassment filled weeks learning to parachute from airplanes like in World War II. There was no place for them to parachute in Nam. The Army realized that years ago but kept sending them to jump school anyway.

I took comfort in the fact that I wasn't part of the most psycho group in Vietnam, just a small group of murdering traitors.

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At the 101<sup>st</sup> I received further orders to the 326<sup>th</sup> Medical Battalion.

They hadn't mentioned it was a Medical Battalion. A Medical Battalion meant that the fat, wallowing Huey's would have big Red Crosses on a white background. One on each side about three feet high and another big Red Cross on a white background marking the exact center of where the two pilots sat. They made great targets.

On top of that they had no guns that could shoot out the front or rear. Like every

almost other Huey in Nam, all they would have were two piddling M-60's on each door next to the big targets.

I was beginning to understand why Connie's Daddy was a General.

## CHAPTER 9

I reported to the Battalion Clerk. A kid named Evans, Spec4, bright, efficient. He looked me over real closely. Was he part of the gang? Having the company clerk onside makes most of the Army scams possible. The fact that my pay records were, “real fucked up, sir,” seemed to allay a lot of his suspicion. Evidently Shanghaiing Medevac pilots wasn't uncommon.

My pay was, “probably going to take ‘awhile’ to get straightened out.” In the meantime I could owe the Mess Hall Fee that allowed us to buy decent food outside of channels and the Officers Club Fee that provided us a place to get really cheap alcohol and the Activities Fee, assuming I wanted to use the pool. The pool sounded good. He didn't mention they hadn't built it yet.

Saw the Major again and we pretended it was the first time. We put on a show for the clerk. So the Major didn't trust him either. He apologized for not giving me a day or two to get oriented. I assured him I was cocked and loaded.

The Major pretended to look at a clipboard for a moment and told Evans, “have Mack drop his stuff at the hooch and then drive him over to Goshen's ship.”

Hooches were what the Army called barracks in Vietnam. No one knew why. These were Quonset Huts that had been divided by 6 feet high plywood walls into 6 by 8 feet rooms. Each room had a cot, a footlocker and a hanging locker. They didn't have doors or ceilings. The idea was to allow circulation because of the heat and humidity. Mould still grew overnight.

Evans pointed out an empty room. I tossed my gear on the bed and turned to leave.

A squat Asian woman in black pajama bottoms and a white linen top blocked the doorway. "Yu gae me teh dollah, jai."

She had one of those Asian faces that could be anywhere between 30 and 60. Her hand was outstretched and it was clear she had no intention of moving until I did what she wanted. Her mouthful of gold teeth competed for attention with her yellow blood shot eyes. She looked straight into the middle of my chest which was also about her height.

I had no idea what she was talking about.

"Mama-san Number One is in charge of the hooch mates," Evans explained.

"They'll wash and iron your clothes, keep your boots spit shined, clean your hooch, pull KP, maybe a few extras."

"Like prostitutes?"

"Nah prstu, guod ghahls! Wsah cloh, ern."

"They're like maids," Evans explained. "Keep your hooch clean, wash and press your clothes, fresh sheets twice a week."

"Maid service in Vietnam?"

"Employs the locals, community relations, gets us out of a lot of shit work."

I bristled at the mention of shit work. Did Evans know? Was he yanking my chain to see how I would react?

“Ten Dallah.”

“Mama San Number One is in charge of all the girls. You pay her twice a month, five bucks a week.”

Vietnam was getting expensive but maid service sounded pretty good. Mama San got my ten.

Next stop was the quartermaster. I drew a flight helmet, and a .38 revolver complete with holster and five rounds of ammo. Confidence inspiring, not.

Evans and I got back into the jeep and headed toward the flight line. Time to meet my new playmates. Cowboys and Indians with real bullets. The guys CID thinks are selling medical supplies to the enemy. Guys that probably killed my two predecessors. Spy versus Spy versus Spy. Double dealing from the top of the deck. Everybody gets a Claymore and a couple of grenades. Play nice.

I decided to try to pump Evans for some information. “What’s my new crew like?”

“What do you mean sir?”

Time to try for an ally. “Forget the sir stuff. My name’s Mack. I know they’re going to look at me as an FNG. I just want to try to get things right.”

This seemed to lighten him up.

“I’m pretty new here myself, sir, I mean Mack. I still have 307 days to go. It takes everyone awhile to warm up to new guys. Just do your job and you’ll be okay.”

I nodded.

“You’re lucky in one way. They’re a real tight crew. Been together over six months. Everybody thinks Ghost, that’s your AC, is one of the best. He used to be a Cobra Pilot, like you. This is his second tour.”

We stopped at the edge of the flight line.

“That’s your bird over there.”

The helicopters were parked in individual revetments. Revetments are basically a five feet high pile of sandbags covered in corrugated iron. The idea was to protect the aircraft from anything but a direct mortar hit.

About twenty yards away there was a thin guy with graying hair who looked about 40. He was talking to a balding, runty guy with a rat like face and a scraggly mustache. Sitting on the edge of the cargo bay, cleaning an AK-47, was a Staff Sergeant Green Beret.

“That’s your AC talking to Doc, your crew chief.”

“Who’s the Green Beret?”

“That’s Farmboy, he’s your Medic.”

“Isn’t a Green Beret a little over qualified?”

Evans looked surprised. “Didn’t they tell you?”

The look on my face assured him they hadn’t.

“Your bird is TDY to CCN SOG indefinite.”

I knew TDY was temporary duty and understood indefinite but the rest was lost on me. “Run that by me in English.”

He spoke slowly. “You are on indefinite temporary duty to Command and Control North for the Studies and Observation Group.”

It was in English but I was still lost. “What’s Command and Control North?”

“They’re in charge of North Vietnam and Laos.”

We weren’t supposed to be in North Vietnam or Laos. “And what is the Studies and Observation Group?”

“Officially they don’t exist. They’re the guys behind enemy lines.”

I felt my throat tighten. My gut knotted. I felt like I was about to shit a brick. Just bury me now and get it over with.

Connie’s Daddy had kicked my ass into the deepest, darkest corner of hell.

I faked a smile. “Sounds good,” I lied.

All I could think of was that I was a dead man. Right here. Right now. The rest was just details. Details that I was sure would involve a lot of pain.

I forced myself out of the jeep.

## CHAPTER 10

I reluctantly got out of the jeep. I put my helmet under my left arm.

I marched over to the Aircraft Commander, determined to impress. I gave him one of my snappy salutes.

“Warrant Officer Mack reporting for duty, sir.”

“Stop that.”

Now the army had taught me a lot of basic commands, Attention, At Ease, Right Face, Left Face. Stop That wasn't one of them. I held the salute and felt confused. The Aircraft Commander was looking pissed off.

“Put your God-damned arm down.”

I dropped the salute. Behind the AC I watched the runty crew chief and the most intimidating medic I ever saw, looking at me like I was from a different planet.

“Listen Slick, see that big white line over there.” His voice was softer now. Just a bit of a Southern twang. “That line is called the flight line.”

I knew what a flight line was, it separated the aircraft operations area from the rest of the field.

“Now I want you to look at that tree line over there.”

At the edge of the base, about a quarter mile away, was a hundred meters of cleared, barb wired and heavily mined perimeter. Beyond that was jungle and hills.

“Now the first thing you need to know is that the Army stops at that white line. We don’t salute here or any of that other bullshit.”

“Yes sir.”

“Do you know why that is?”

Because you’re the Aircraft Commander and what you say goes. “No sir.”

“Well there’s this fellow we call Luke the Gook. Luke is out there everyday with his sniper rifle. He only gets one shot a day ‘cause after that the perimeter guards go crazy with their M-60’s. Now old Luke likes to make his one shot a day count for something. He could take out some PFC perimeter guard anytime he wants but Luke is after bigger game. Luke wants to kill officers so when you salute me you are threatening my life. Get it?”

“Yes sir.” So much for first impressions

“Doc, Farmboy, come over here and meet Slick.”

Wary of Luke the Gook and wanting to come off as a regular guy I reached out to shake hands. “Hi, John Mack.”

Doc’s nametag said his name was Wilkins. He reluctantly looked at me. The look on his face told me he didn’t want to know me or my name.

To him I was just a Fucking New Guy. A danger at worst, another potential trauma at best. Or was that vice versa? Didn’t matter, both were true.

He wiped his hand on a greasy rag and gave me half a limp shake.

Farmboy unfolded himself from the edge of the cargo door. I'm 5 feet, 10 inches. He was a good 6 inches taller. He had blue eyes under his Green Beret, recruiter poster good looks and zero body fat. He wasn't heavily muscled but the muscles he had rippled under his skin like wire rope.

Farmboy's hand wrapped around mine. I could feel the muscles in the back of his hand. His hand was hard but he held mine gently. I had no doubt he could crush me like a peanut. Unlike Doc, he looked me in the eye. The look I saw suggested he was trying to decide if he should kill me now or later. Farmboy didn't have nametags on his uniform.

Introductions over, the AC turned back to the aircraft.

"How's it looking, Doc?"

"It's a fuckin' death trap. I ain't had time to reinforce the new transmission. The air frame is fatigued and I've got more tape over bullet holes than we do fuselage." Doc spoke fast in a definite New Yawk accent.

I looked the helicopter over. It looked okay to me but I could see more than a dozen small pieces of olive drab tape stuck onto the fuselage. Somehow I hadn't expected the Army to just tape over bullet holes.

"Can we take Slick here up for a ride?"

"It's your funeral."

"Slick, why don't you take us through the pre-flight."

My mind raced back several months to Huey training. After my less than stellar first impression I was determined to do this right. They would see me as a real asset, not a

Fucking New Guy.

I crawled all over that helicopter from stem to stern. I checked the engine, the transmission and flight controls. I opened all the inspection ports along the tail and made sure the controls were free.

I climbed up on the roof and checked the rotor blades. I made sure the Jesus Nut on top of the rotor was properly safety wired. The Jesus Nut got its name from the fact that if it flew off, the rotors fell off, and you saw Jesus.

Doc followed me, looking over my shoulder every step of the way. I got the distinct impression he didn't like anybody touching his bird. After 20 minutes I felt I had checked everything at least twice.

It seemed to be a standard Huey in good shape. The only things out of the ordinary were an eight track tape system wired into the intercom and a collection of gold and silver crucifixes, Jewish Stars of David's, Ying-Yang's, Peace sign medallions, Holy Cards and a few things I didn't recognize hanging from their chains in the middle of the cockpit. Maybe these guys were more religious than they appeared.

There were also two boxes marked First Aid. One was the standard bandages and all. The other was full of Baseball Grenades. Two AK-47's hung from the roof of the cargo bay in improvised racks. Each had a 20 round clip in the chamber and two more clips duct taped upside down. It allowed for fast reloading. All very non-spec but they had nothing to do with flying the aircraft

They were down to half a tank of fuel but they were probably on their way to fill up.

“Looks ship shape to me, Sir. We’re down to half a tank of fuel.”

“We always fly with half a tank, SOP,” Doc chimed in.

Yeah right.

“That’d be correct,” the AC added. “You know how much a half tank of fuel weighs?”

I knew this in flight school months ago but it wasn’t coming to mind now. I watched the crew make a mental note of my ignorance during the ensuing silence.

“600 lbs. That’s 4 grunts more payload,” my AC answered.

These guys were serious. No smiles. No jokes. Totally serious. Seriously nuts. The fuel gauge on a Huey was notoriously inaccurate. The last quarter tank is a total crapshoot.

“Since you’re so concerned about fuel, did you notice any condensation in the fuel tank?”, asked my AC.

Shit. Between the humidity in Vietnam and the change of temperature between the ground and 5000 or so feet, it was very easy for water condensation to form inside the fuel tank. Especially half a tank.

The JP4 jet fuel we used was lighter than water so the condensation collected on the bottom of the tank. You might think you still had an eighth of a tank of fuel when all of a sudden your engine started sucking water and stopped dead.

Doc smirked as he handed me an empty glass jar. I crawled under the aircraft and opened the fuel petcock. The can filled with pure jet fuel, no water.

I crawled back out. “Fuels looks good, sir.”

“Well let’s go for a ride.”

Everyone turned to get into the helicopter.

“Should we arm up first sir?”, I asked.

Everyone stopped. They looked at each other, then they turned and looked at me.

“Arm up?”, Ghost drawled it out to two sentences. “What exactly do you mean by arm up?” Doc and Farmboy did this smirky laugh thing. They were really starting to piss me off. When you see me looking for Army type discipline you can be sure that things are well and truly out of hand.

I smiled. This was probably some type of newbie initiation. I’ll play along, show what a great guy I am.

“You know, the door guns.” Blank looks. “M-60 machine guns. You know, like every other Huey in Vietnam.”

Doc and Farmboy seem amused.

“Listen, Slick, you’re pulling my leg right?”, my AC asked.

Now I’m confused. “Sir?”

“Dustoff’s don’t have guns.”

Riiight. I played along. “If you say so, sir.”

Doc and Farmboy laughed.

“Tell him, Doc.”

“Motherfucking Geneva Conventions. The Red Crosses means we are non-combatants.”

Bullshit, I thought.

Ghost walked over to the left side of the helicopter, right behind where the co-pilot sits, and patted the 3-foot high Red Cross. “Some say this Red Cross is all the protection you’ll need.” He peeled off one of a half dozen pieces of olive drab tape from the Red Cross. The bullet hole wasn’t very dramatic, just a neat round hole. It was more of a spray than a grouping of bullet hole tape across the neat Red Crosses.

Okay, enough of this game. I may be new but I’m not stupid. “So they shoot at us and we can’t shoot back?” That will show them the obvious flaw in their logic and that I’m not an idiot.

“You got it, Slick,” Ghost drawled.

Okay, enough is enough. I smile my nice guy smile like I appreciate the joke. “Guys, every single Huey I have seen since I have been in country has at least an M-60 hanging off each door.” I am not an idiot. I let my smile say the last bit.

“Not Dustoff’s,” Ghost was losing patience.

“I’ve seen Dustoff’s with guns,” I answered calmly. I wanted these guys to respect me, not just like me.

“Where?”, the low guttural snarl came from Farmboy who seemed to be taking it personally.

“Long Binh. The First Air Cavalry,” I said, trying to be as non-confrontational as possible.

“Long Binh?” Doc jumps on it.

Oh, fuck me. I just busted myself. Replacements for the North all went through DaNang, Long Binh supplied the South, not I Corp. Maybe I should just introduce myself

as an undercover spy and get it over with.

Farmboy was still chewing on my answer, not happy. He spit on the ground and growled, “First of all, their call sign is “Medevac”, not Dustoff,” definitely taking it personally. “Second, this ain’t the fucking cavalry.”

Up until that point in my life I had always thought of Medevac and Dustoff as the exact same thing. However, if Farmboy says they are different I wasn’t prepared to argue the point.

“Long Binh?” Doc repeats, like it’s Neptune.

Ghost smiles. He can see I have fucked myself. “We really don’t need guns. They’d interfere with loading the patients. And again, the weight of two 60’s and ammo is another grunt. Besides, the Army has something even better to protect you. After spending so much money training you, they really want to keep you safe. Doc, get the chickenplate.”

The chickenplate. These guys are real ball busters. Fairly lame as jokesters. I’ll let them have their new guy fun.

Doc reaches into the helicopter and comes out with what looks like an olive drab fishing vest. There's a couple of big dark stains as well as dried sweat stains under the arms. These guys testing to see if I’m prissy.

It smells worse than it looks. I’m cool and go along with it. Doc slips it on me and closes it with velcro straps. Then he velcro's a 20-pound cloth covered plate to the front of the vest. The dark stains feel a little sticky.

Farmboy thumps me on the plate, almost knocking me over. “It’ll stop an AK

round,” he says.

“There’s also a little pocket in the front there that fits a camera perfectly”, Ghost adds.

Yeah, right guys.

Farmboy reads my look as a challenge. “I’ll show you,” he offers. He reaches for the AK’s in the cargo bay. I’m not sure he’s kidding. He pulls out an AK-47. He doesn’t strike me as the kidding type.

“That’s okay, Farmboy,” Ghost says. Like he thinks Farmboy might do it too!  
“I’m sure Slick will take your word for it.”

“No problem,” I manage to squeak.

Farmboy looks at me, AK hanging loosely at his side, like he’s perfectly happy to shoot me if it will put my mind at rest. Things are getting weirder and scarier by the moment. These guys are over the bend, off the reservation, scary nuts.

“Don’t forget to tell him about the sliding door armor,” Doc offered.

“That’s right, that’s a real comfort,” Ghost agreed. He opened the cockpit door and waved me to my seat. “The bottom of your seat is fully armored, plus,” he closed the door and Doc slid a ceramic plate about a foot square along a sliding track next to my door. It locked in place with an ominous click. “Just be sure to remind Doc to unlock it if we crash or you won’t be able to get out.”

Ghost said it without a trace of a smile. I looked around for a release button, but nothing. I was getting freaked out that my life was going to be in the hands of a weasley little psychopath. I flashed on a training film that showed how easily a Huey went up in

toxic flames. A way too real visualization of what it would like to be trapped in a burning helicopter. We were told that the fumes would probably kill us before our flesh burnt. I guess that was supposed to make us feel better.

I was suddenly aware that all three of them were on the outside, looking at me trapped inside a plastic bubble with a 20 pound weight hanging off my chest. All that is protecting my arms, legs and head is a plastic windshield that wouldn't stop a .22.

The way they look at me, I realize they know who I am and that I'm there to bust them. They know, that I know, that they know. It seems to amuse them. Farmboy is casually holding an AK-47.

"Don't you feel safe now?", Ghost grins.

I could picture how the previous co-pilots had been killed to look like combat. Look like combat? With no guns, little tiny scraps of body armor and a half tank of fuel, dying in combat seemed like a good bet.

Then between Farmboy with his AK's and psycho Doc waiting to trap me in a burning wreck, the odds of getting home in one piece were looking pretty slim. Non-existent to be precise.

They knew I was a spy. Just like the last two guys. The last two dead guys. I have no doubt that they are going to kill me. Just a question of how and when.