

HEADSHOT

A True Story

by

Thomas C. Knust

Tom Knust always wanted to be in the fight . . . the question was why?

He tried to slay all the dragons, first the ones within his own neighborhood, then beyond.

Armed with his bulletproof optimism he ventured ahead . . . until . . .

“Headshot” is a true story about fighting from the back lots and streets of America to the jungles of Vietnam.

About going to sleep one night in the green stench of war with that “bulletproof optimism” and waking up with the enemy . . . pessimism.

“Compelling reading” ... “Heartfelt and inspiring”

Emmy Award Winning Writer, David Milch

“Reading this book was a lesson in what true competitiveness and courage is.

I deal with danger and competition every day, but it is nothing compared to Tom Knust’s story. I am proud to be his friend.”

Hall of Fame Jockey, Gary Stevens

The Greyhound reject limped towards the Marine Recruit Depot filled with a bunch of young men pondering their future.

It was dark. A string of lights hit me like a playing card slapping the spokes of a slow-moving bicycle. I hadn't slept for 3 days.

A Marine recruit had a lot on his mind in those days. Vietnam mostly. And we had our reasons for being on that bus. Mine? It was simple. I would rather be in a fight than watch one. The question was why.

My mind kept drifting into the past...here, many answers awaited me...I just had to think of more questions. 1951. A 4-year-old in Alameda, California, sitting at the kitchen table, watching his father confidently strapping his gun belt on...kissing mom goodobye.

Dad was one of Berkeley's finest (all 6 feet, 180 pounds of him). At 15 he had run away and joined the Marine Corps. He educated himself to the point that he finished first or second on every civil service test he ever took.

Compassionate, he always would be the cop who would take the time to help the most impoverished of kids.

Even though raising a family and working 60 or so hours a week would limit his availability, he was able to find the time (with the help of some Good Samaritans) to clear a weedy, trash-infested vacant lot and start up a sports program for all the local kids in the most run-down part of the city. This was years before people, much less a cop, really took the time to be interested in a community other than their own.

My mom...not tall in height, but surely in statute... was always so consistent, no matter what the turmoil.

She was a confidante to just about every person she knew and always gave 100 percent of herself. There was never, ever, a question of her being there for any of her friends, let alone her family. This trait gave people around her, specially myself, my brother and sister, a lot of strength.

Every morning mom would make sure that my older brother, Ken (taller than most sixth graders, and extremely athletic), and my 7-year-old sister, Gail (blonde hair cut just above the shoulders, smart, and despite her crooked nose, very attractive) had their lunches ready and were dressed for school. (Me? No school, no dress code.) She then would feed us a not-so-nutritious breakfast of Sugar Pops (hey, I wasn't complaining) before heading to her real job selling See's Candies in San Francisco.

Once my brother and sister headed for school, my inimitable grandfather would come up to me and say, "It's you and me, kid."

Grandfather owned a 12-unit apartment building in Alameda, and during that time we all lived in the same old wood-frame two-story house in the rear - my family, my grandfather and my conventional grandmother.

Conventional is actually an understatement when describing my grandmother. She never swore, drank liquor, argued politics or religion.

She never even learned how to drive a car. One thing she did have, however, was the patience of Job. With grandfather around, everyone had to...(except me!) Even dad's overwhelming compassion for people would be tested often by my sometimes roguish grandfather. And at time, would even put a 4-year-old kid in an awkward position.

I remember lying in bed and hearing dad and grandfather yelling at one another. They had argued before, but this time they were especially violent. I got out of bed and cautiously crept to the top of the stairwell and then nervously knelt down and stared through the wood posts.

There was grandfather stumbling around, smashed to the gills. Dad, showing little patience, started to get a little physical to get his point across. As I watched from above, I had a weird feeling in my stomach that I had never experienced before. I didn't like it.

The shouting started to escalate. Some shoving ensued, and grandfather lost his balance and went crashing through the plate glass window that made up most the front door.

Blood spurted everywhere as my dad quickly and with concern lifted grandfather from the shards of shattered glass.

Dad wasn't yelling anymore, and neither was grandfather.

Dad wrapped grandfather's hand with a towel and drove off with him. I assumed they were going to the hospital, but it also ran through my mind they just wanted to get out of Dodge, before mom got home.

I got back into bed feeling sorry for grandfather, but even worse for my dad. I knew he would never consciously do anything to hurt gramps.

I was wide awake and my heart was pumping. I was bothered that I had witnessed something terrible and had just watched. It wasn't a matter if I could have done something or not, just the feeling that I should have tried. So, I just lay there feeling very guilty and way too young to have a clue why.

Grandfather's hand was pretty messed up; the tendons were severed to the point he could not move any of the fingers on his right hand. Not the best thing for someone who made his living as a mechanic.

The incident had a profound effect on my dad. Whether it was guilt or his love for my mom (or fear), he was a lot more forgiving when it came to grandfather's drinking. Mom wasn't as forgiving, though, and both had to walk on eggshells around her for a long time to come.

Grandfather was a top-notch inventor and quite resourceful. So, he just adapted all his tools to fit his curled-up hand and went right on working without skipping a beat (or a drink).

He had his makeshift machine shop in the basement of his apartment building. A master mechanic, would-be inventor and connoisseur of 25-year-old bourbon, he would have a dozen pet projects going on at the same time, an amount equal to the number of bottles of whiskey hidden throughout his not-so-tidy workshop.

Grandfather paid me not to divulge the whereabouts of these bottles to mom, and mom would pay me to find the bottles and water them down. I gladly played both ends against the middle. But I would never tell Mom where the bottles were hidden. I did, however, water them down as instructed, and grandfather never knew the difference. I made a pretty good 4-year-old detective, but a lousy snitch.

Whenever gramps took me to his workshop, the first thing I would do was put a couple of blasting caps in a vice. Then he would let me hit them with a large ballpeen hammer. (He figured that would keep me occupied for...well...at least three swigs.)

Then, he would tell me stories (or yarns) of his adventurous younger years, stories that generally involved mass mayhem, dismemberments, killings, people being shanghaied, etc. All the typical stories parents would just "love" their impressionable 4-year-olds to hear!

One story that he particularly liked to tell me was about the time he worked as a welder during the construction of the Boulder Dam. He would go into great detail on how one man a day would fall to his death. And if that person fell into where they were pouring cement, they would just keep pouring, forever encasing the body in a cement grave. He told a similar story about when he worked on the Golden Gate Bridge (one a day there, too!).

I loved his stories, and in a strange way, they helped shaped me into the young man I was to become, be it good or bad.

During the afternoons, I would go to the backyard (a large enough area in which a 4-year-old could have all kinds of adventures) and ride my brother's red bike. The bike was so much bigger than I was that I would have to wheel it up to our not-so-sturdy porch, then climb up onto the even weaker railing and jump for it. Three out of four times I would roll proudly down the dirt and rock-congested driveway. (But oh, that other time...)

Dismounting created similar problems. I couldn't just stop and get off after I had ridden it a ways. I had to look for any flat surface (preferably a SOFT, flat surface) and bail off. Naturally, the bike would continue on, and eventually it turned out to be my big brother's red, busted-up bike.

My best friend was my grandfather's dog, Blackie. He was part German shepherd, part mutt, completely black and on the whole, one good dog. One night, the garage next to the old wooden house where we were living caught fire.

Blackie barked and raised so much ruckus near the front door that it immediately woke up dad and grandfather. Although the garage burned completely down, had not Blackie made enough noise to wake my dad, allowing him to call the fire department, the main house would have been engulfed in flames, with all of us still sound asleep.

Whenever I thought of Blackie and fire incident, I would be reminded of the three-legged pig story my dad once told me. You see, there was this traveling salesman who was out in the country one day peddling his wares. As he walked up to an old farmhouse, he noticed a three-legged pig.

At first, he didn't think twice about the pig and just continued to the house where he met the farmer at the door. As he was pitching his product, his mind suddenly switched to the pig, and he began questioning the farmer.

"That pig is a very special pig," the farmer assured him. "About 3 months ago, my granddaughter was visiting and no one noticed that she down by the pond. She fell in and started to drown, but that magnificent pig jumped into the pond, grabbed the collar of her shirt and pulled her to safety. Saved her life, that pig did."

"Then, a couple of weeks later, my wife was out in the backyard and a rattlesnake had her cornered. Just as the snake was about to strike, that same pig stomped on it, grabbed it with his teeth and killed it."

"Finally, about two weeks ago, I was driving the tractor up a hill and it overturned, throwing me to the ground and pinning me underneath to where I couldn't move or breathe. Just then, that tenacious pig came along, dug underneath me and pulled me to safety. One more minute and I would have been dead for sure."

“That’s amazing,” said the inquisitive salesman, “But how did the pig lose his leg?”

The farmer looked at the salesman, and answered proudly, “Mister, you just don’t eat a good pig like that all at once!”

Naturally, I’d never eat Blackie and that was just a joke, but in reality Blackie was everything that pig was and more.

Once in awhile, late in the afternoon, I’d play a game with Blackie. I would sit on the front porch of the apartment building and as some older neighborhood toughs would walk by, I’d flip them off.

In the normal course of action, after two or three bigger kids have been taunted by a smaller id, they would chase him, presumably to beat the crap out of him. Since I was the intended victim, I would run through the apartment building and into the backyard, where Blackie would be waiting. As soon as the pursuing kids would clear the back door and enter the backyard, Blackie would bark ferociously and go on the attack. Any idea of beating the crap out of smart aleck 4-year-old was quickly erased by one vicious snarl and growl. (Unfortunately, when Blackie wasn’t around, I’d pay the price for my pranks.)

One Blackie was in the backyard and I was sitting on the front porch watching a little dog, who was owned by an elderly couple who lived in the apartment building. I had always felt sorry for the poor mutt because he had a wooden leg (really), and he looked so defenseless.

This particular day a huge, vicious-looking German shepherd came from nowhere and grabbed the dog in his giant jaws and started to shake him back and forth like a rag doll. Without thinking of the consequences, I started running toward the German shepherd, figuring a well-placed kick would make him release the helpless dog from his grasp.

Suddenly, something knocked me down from behind. As I looked up, there was Blackie plowing into the German shepherd. A savage fight ensued and lasted for about a minute or so until the overmatched German shepherd fled down the street. Fortunately, the little dog was all right.

Even though Blackie was somewhat of a local hero, he did have a few, strange quirks. One was he didn’t like anyone in uniform, be it a mailman, policeman (except dad), meter man or whomever. I remember another afternoon when I was in the front and Blackie was in the back, when a marching band came parading in front of the

apartment complex. I thought to myself how lucky the band leader was, dressed in such an impressive uniform, that Blackie was in the backyard.

Well, this band leader wasn't that lucky. He was almost past our place, looking proud and marching so upright, when all of a sudden Blackie came streaking down the driveway.

Those band leaders can run a lot faster than you'd think.

When I finally caught up to them, Blackie had him cornered in an alley. As I grabbed Blackie, the band leader was standing there, not saying a word, just shaking. It was amazing, though, how much courage he was able to muster up once I had a hold of Blackie. He started cursing Blackie and me up one side and down the other. I seriously thought about letting Blackie loose again, but then I would have had my parents to deal with. I guess I really couldn't blame the guy for being made (but what a wimp!).

Whenever Blackie or I would get into trouble, we'd go off somewhere by ourselves. We would roughhouse, chase each other, and I know it sounds strange, but I would talk to him. (No, he never talked back.) With Blackie, I always felt as if I were talking to and having a relationship with another human being.

Although Blackie couldn't do any wrong as far as grandfather and I were concerned, he was not always on my parents' good side. Sometimes we would be getting ready to go somewhere and Black could not be found. On more than one occasion when we would find him, he would have been in a dogfight necessitating a trip to the veterinarian for stitches.

Unfortunately, grandfather and I were often in the same boat. Frequently, my parents would have to either look for grandfather amongst the local bars or search for me throughout the neighborhood. Blackie, grandfather and I, we were three peas in a pod.

One reason my parents had so much patience with all three of us was because of an incident when I was about 4-years-old. It happened one quiet afternoon while I was playing with one of my brother's classmates.

Workmen had dug a hole in our neighbor's front yard to put in a septic tank. For some reason, my brother's oddball friend put me into a large, cardboard box and stuck the box into the hole and filled it in with dirt. Then he nonchalantly walked home as if I never existed.

My parents and grandparents looked for me all over the neighborhood until grandfather noticed Blackie sniffing and digging in some freshly dug dirt next to our



house. Grandfather had a gut feeling and took a shovel and started digging. You could imagine his surprise when he dug up that box and I was in it.

I wasn't scared of being buried alive. I just remember it being cramped and dark and having the secure feeling that someone in my family would come and find me. After grandfather dug me up, I brushed myself off, called for Blackie, and went down the street to play.

It took my family a little longer to get back to normal. By the way, my brother's friend told my parents that he just forgot about me. (Hmmm. A friend of my brother's. I wonder...Nah!)

## Chapter 2

Every Friday night, my dad, who was an avid boxing fan, and I would watch the Pabst Blue Ribbon fights. Occasionally dad would go to the live fights with some of his friends, and on a few occasions he would bring home the actual boxing gloves that were used in one of the fights. My brother and I would put the gloves on and box relentlessly for hours. Quite often I would get battered, but I enjoyed boxing, and I sure learned a lot, like when you throw a punch use your legs and put your body behind it.

Also there were times we would make a ring in our backyard and some of the neighborhood kids would come over. We would box all day. I could outfight any of the kids my age, but when it came to my brother or his friends, well 7 years' difference at that age was just too much to overcome.

Speaking of fighting, I remember the time I was in third grade and my sister was in sixth, I was walking home from school and three of her classmates were shoving a kid in my class. He happened to be a little slow mentally, and as they shoved him repeatedly, they kept calling him names. Even though they were classmates of my sister, she would never have anything to do with idiots like them.

The three bullies were older and bigger than me, but when I saw what was happening, I dropped my books and charged them. I hit one of them before he knew what was happening, and I tackled another. Then, as fast as it started, some parents passing by broke it up. The three big apes probably would have hammered me pretty good, but the schooling with my brother had toughened me up and I could have taken it. When my sister heard of the incident, she was furious. I could only think those guys were lucky she wasn't there, too.

My grandfather had been in a few scrapes himself. In fact, some of those scrapes would be material for his enthralling bedtime stories. Most nights he would tell of his adventures all over the world; about the times he was a merchant marine and sailed the unpredictable China Seas. He would tell of 20 men getting off the ship when it docked in mainland China and only 5 getting back on. He would slowly, and with deep earnest, tell me the ones who didn't return to the ship were either shanghaied or murdered.

He had many bedtime stories, but the one I like the best was when he was transporting a load of gold across the rugged mountains of Montana in an old, wooden wagon pulled by a team of half-starved horses. He was cold and tired, so he pulled the team up to a broken-down old hotel. He unhitched the wagon, fed the horses a little grain and went inside the hotel and checked in. The man and woman running the hotel were as seedy as the hotel. When grandfather got up to his creepy room, he became very uneasy. He was suspicious that not everything was on the up and up.

His suspicions were confirmed when he looked the worn-out decrepit thing that was supposed to be his bed. Underneath was a partly decomposed body, the previous occupant, he presumed. The dead man's throat had been cut from ear to ear. Grandfather wasn't going to take any chances. He fixed his bed, which supposedly was meant to be his coffin, by stacking pillows side by side to make it look as if he were sleeping. Then he hid in the closet and waited. A couple of hours later, the seedy, old woman crept up the stairs and slowly opened his door. In her hand was a large butcher knife. Just as she slithered through the doorway, she lunged towards the bed and started thrusting the knife into the empty bed. Before she realized that she was missing her mark, grandfather jumped out of the closet and hit her over the head with a large piece of cast iron pipe. She fell to the floor, not to get up.

Grandfather would go on, telling me how he got out of the hotel and delivered the gold safely. I never did tell my parents about these stories, because I knew they would not have approved, but at the same time, I doubt if they would have been surprised.

There were quite a few other things that I did that my parents, had they known, would not have approved of. Like when the neighborhood kids and my brother would dig tunnels and connect them to underground caves. I remember crawling on my hands and knees down a twisting, narrow tunnel and finally reaching a dark, cold underground cave. The stability of these caves was questionable at best. So let's just say my parents were better off not knowing about the stories, the caves and maybe a few other things!

## Chapter 3

When I was in the fourth grade, I had a very good friend named Jerry Grady. Jerry was my age but went to a different school and lived with his parents in a run-down area of Alameda. Our moms worked together, and every so often, when mom visited Mrs. Grady, I would tag along.

Usually, Jerry and I would go across the street to the municipal county park and play catch while our moms visited. One day I remember walking up to Jerry as he sat on the curb of the sidewalk near the park. His head was down, there were tears in his eyes and he was drawing circles in the dirt with his finger. Lying next to him was an old football we always used to play catch with.

I asked him what was wrong.

He told me he was playing the park earlier, and this husky kid, about four years older than us and twice our size, approached him. The kid was holding a big stick with a rusty nail protruding through the bottom and told Jerry he couldn't play in the park anymore. If he found him there again, he would take the stick and drive the nail right through his "fucking foot." (According to Jerry, that last part was direct quote.)

I told Jerry that no bully was going to prevent us from playing in the park. Jerry hesitated when I suggested we deft the ruffian and play catch.

"Throw me the football!" I demanded.

It wasn't too long after we started playing that the bully, with his stock in hand, came out from the adjoining apartment building. (Jerry was right; he was BIG!) As he approached us, he started yelling and threatening us with the stick. Just before he got to us, I lunged forward and pushed down on the stick and drove the nail into the bully's own foot. Blood started gushing and he started to squeal like the coward he was, moaning all the way as he limped back into his apartment building.

Jerry wanted to leave the park right away, but I still wanted to play catch. We stayed.

A few minutes later the bully returned from the apartment building with his mother, who started screaming obscenities at us. After being verbally assaulted for a number of minutes, I was able to get a few words in and I explained to her what had happened. Luckily, she recognized the stick as being an old mop handle of hers.

I always wondered what hurt the most after that, his foot or his butt?

Jerry and I continued playing catch, but this time Jerry didn't want to leave.

I know Jerry enjoyed the park as I did, but his reasons went much deeper than mine. Since his parents didn't have much, they couldn't afford to give Jerry many material things that other kids enjoyed. The park gave him something to look forward to, and he never had to feel guilty about his parents spending money they really didn't have.

Jerry's love for the park was why I didn't feel bad about hurting that bully. There will always be bullies and there will always be people bullied. Hopefully, there will always be someone around willing to help.

A couple of months later Jerry invited me to his house for his birthday. His dad promised him that he could go to the local toy store and pick out anything he wanted. Jerry was really excited, and he wanted to make sure I was with him to share his excitement.

Jerry's dad drove us to the toy store, and once inside, Jerry browsed for about an hour before deciding on a wooden toy rifle. The rifle was expensive, probably more than his dad could actually afford. I remember his dad going to the counter and purchasing not one, but two rifles. He gave the second one to me!

I didn't know what to say. I still doubted his dad could afford one rifle, let alone two, but he was very persistent. Like Jerry, he wanted me to share in the moment. And the fact that Jerry was as pleased with my present as he was with his made a big impression with me.

Unfortunately, Jerry's dad passed away about 3 months later. I had always wondered about that day in the toy store. Did he know he only had a few more months to live?

Jerry was a lot quieter after his dad's death. I wanted to help him work through it, but not long afterwards, my family moved to Southern California.

I never saw Jerry again, but every time I would see someone trying to take advantage of or intimidate someone else, I thought of him and that day in the park.

## Chapter 4

I remember how depressed my brother and sister were when we moved to Southern California. They didn't like the fact that they had to leave their friends and all of our relatives. Maybe they were afraid of the unknown----new friends, new school, new neighbors. Not me. I was looking forward to all those things. I looked at it as a new adventure. I was also excited that my grandparents and Blackie moved south with us.

On the first day at my new school, I happened to notice another sixth grade student named Mike Boone. He wore old, blue jeans and a black T-shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and he had his thick, black hair slicked back (strange looking would be an understatement, even if you discounted the fact that he only had one eyebrow). He was shoving another kid and taunting him to hit him in the mouth.

"Come on, hit me right here," this Mike character kept daring the other kid while pointing to his own jaw. Scared beyond belief, his victim wasn't about to throw any punches, and the incident eventually ended without anyone getting hurt.

A day later I was in line to play some kind of game. I don't remember, it might have been tetherball, but this Mike Boone guy cut right in front of me.

"Excuse me," I said, "but I'm next." (Maybe I wasn't that pleasant.) He told me to shut up and stay away from him or he would beat the shit out of me. It was obvious that he had been able to intimidate his classmates in the past with no repercussions. So, I was fairly blunt. I told him to get to the back of the line or I would knock him flat on his ass. And, as it turned out, I could not have scripted it any better.

Just like with the other kid, he started taunting me to hit him in the mouth. Remembering my father taught me to use my legs and body, I accommodated his request. He flew back about 3 feet and landed flat on his ass, just as I had warned. Within a few seconds the yard supervisor came running over. Strangely enough, Mike Boone and I actually became friends. Also, and not just by chance, Mike never again invited someone to hit him in the mouth.

Most weekends I spent with my grandparents. They lived across town in a neighborhood of mostly Hispanics and Blacks. I had a few friends there, and, of course, I had Blackie.

There were times, because of grandfather's drinking, that my grandmother would stay at our house. So it would be just grandfather and me. One particular night, we had gotten into an argument while playing blackjack (we both used to cheat), and I went outside for a moment so we both could cool off. When I tried to go back into the house,

grandfather had locked all the doors. I found an unlocked window, and as I was crawling through it, my inebriated grandfather called the cops and reported a burglar.

I didn't really know if he actually thought I was a burglar or not...I think he was just being ornery...but in any case he settled down once I was back in the house. Still, I had to explain to the police when they came to the door what had taken place. (Not an easy task to say the least.)

I always loved going to grandfather's house, not just because we got along so great (all right, except when we played blackjack) and I got to see Blackie, but it just so happened the next door neighbor had an old mare. Yes, an old grey mare, and he would let me ride her anytime I wanted. (I was Roy Rogers one day and Hop-along Cassidy the next.)

Oftentimes, however, I would end up in a fight with some toughs of the neighborhood. Many of them just didn't like white kids, and they would bluntly tell me so. Others were just plain mean. The prejudices were hard for me to understand at the time. I had many friends of different ethnic backgrounds, and we never thought twice about it.

One afternoon as I was playing in front of grandfather's house, a number of local hoodlums confronted me. They were giving me a pretty rough time, and I probably should have just gone into the house. But I didn't, and they kept on taunting me. Some shoving began, and before I knew it I found myself in a skirmish with all four of them.

I was getting the worst of it when Blackie came running to the front gate. Fortunately for them the gate was shut and Blackie could do was bark ferociously and try to jump the fence. Then one of the young thugs picked up a sharp rock and threw it at Blackie, hitting him right between the eyes and causing a bloody gash.

All I could think about was Blackie. I saw a broken bottle lying in the gutter and picked it up and threatened the gang of kids with it. I think they were shocked that they had split Blackie's head open, and they probably saw the determination in my face (and the razor sharp glass in my hand might have had something to do with it), so they got the hell out of there as fast as they could.

I unlocked the gate and Blackie immediately came running up to me vigorously wagging his tail. When I started petting him, he took his bloody head and started running it deep into my lap. The wound turned out not to be too serious, and after a quick trip to the vet, Blackie was good as new. (After all, he was a veteran.)

When I wasn't getting into trouble in my grandparents' neighborhood, I was doing a pretty good job in my own. We lived in a new development in the Del Rosa

section of San Bernardino. The area was surrounded by a number of vacant lots. So, just as my brother and his friends used to do, my friends and I dug a system of tunnels and underground caves.

One day in particular, I had just crawled out of one of our makeshift underground caves and happened upon the neighborhood bully. For no apparent reason (except for just being a stupid jackass), he started to jump up and down on top of the cave I had just exited. I screamed at him to stop, telling him that there was another boy and his little sister still down in the cave. I felt his jumping could cause it to cave in. He just thought it was funny and continued to jump up and down. I tried physically to stop him, but he was twice my size and just kicked me in the stomach and continued his stupid antics.

My friend then crawled out of the tunnel, almost in tears. He pleaded with the guy to stop jumping, that his sister was too scared to move from the cave into the tunnel.

The guy just laughed and kept it up, so I decided to crawl back into the tunnel in an attempt to lure her out.

As I was crawling to my friend's sister, the dirt kept falling, and every time the guy jumped, the dirt would fall harder. When I reached her, she was holding onto a flashlight as tight as she could and her body was rigid and shaking with fear. It took a few minutes, but I finally was able to coax her into crawling out of the cave with me. When we reached the surface, the guy took off. We never told our parents what happened. We didn't want them to find out about our secret, underground, not-so-sturdy caves.

Trouble seemed to come easy, almost in waves, like the time my brother tirelessly built a race car to enter in the Soap Box Derby. He meticulously built it out of small wooden blocks, putting it together one block at a time. He had won the area derby and finished second in the state finals. He used to keep it in the garage, and once in a while he would race it down the street, but never, and I mean NEVER, would he let me drive it.

One weekend, when my parents, sister, and brother were gone, my grandparents were watching me.

The timing was right, so a friend and I snuck the soap box out of the garage and raced it a few times down the street ourselves. Those runs were not exciting enough, so we took the soap box up a fire trail in the foothills. We gave it a push and headed straight down. Well, it didn't take long for us to realize that we were going way too fast. By the time we hit the street, we were going twice as fast as before, and I lost control. We headed straight across the street, hit the curb, split the 6-inch solid oak bottom in two and smashed through a wooden fence. The little wooden blocks just exploded, and



the only thing left was the steering wheel. We both were all tight, maybe a bruise or two, but we still had my brother to deal with. It was a good thing my parents were home when my brother found out. (Whatever happened to that old saying, blood is thicker than water?)

Well, since my brother, neighbors and an assortment of other things hadn't killed me, I finally made it to high school.

## Chapter 5

Pacific High School with 7,500 students, was one of the biggest 3-year high schools in the country. Every hallway, every place you turned, you would bump into someone. It was a difficult place for me to be and still keep out of trouble.

When I wasn't getting into trouble, I was playing football or wrestling. A couple hundred students tried out for the football team, and when I went out for the wrestling team, there were over hundred.

I made a first-string on the football team and lettered varsity in wrestling my sophomore year. I had an advantage over most everyone with both football and wrestling. As far as football was concerned, I already had played 3 years of Pop Warner, 1 year of bantam and 1 year of junior high school football.

My brother wrestled in high school and college and practiced at the local Y.M.C.A. For 3 years before going to high school, I would tag along with him to the Y.M.C.A. As his coach worked with him, he would also teach me how to wrestle.

Sports came easy to me. I was competitive, but I didn't take them as seriously as some. One thing I should have taken more seriously my sophomore year were my study habits. One day, I had stayed home from school sick in bed (legitimately, honest!). Mom came home early from work and walked in with the mail. She opened a letter from the high school, turned white as the sheet of paper she was reading and immediately went into a state of trauma. The letter was to inform my parents that I was flunking all of my classes (except P.E., naturally).

It was obviously a matter for my dad to handle. To my surprise, he was very calm as he lectured me on the importance of an education. To his surprises, I actually listened.

The following day we paid a visit to the principal, and after some assurances from my dad, it was decided that I would be placed on academic probation for the next semester.

With football and wrestling season over, I had more time to concentrate on my classes. Eventually, I improved all my grades and in doing so my parents regained some confidence in me. Still I think they were uneasy with the size of the school. That might have had something to do with my dad accepting a transfer to El Monte, California, with the Alcohol Beverage Control Board.

Within a few months after the transfer, my parents purchased a home in Arcadia, near El Monte. Later that summer my grandparents also moved to Arcadia. We were all

together again, except for Blackie, who, a month earlier, went to sleep one night and never work up.

His death made me feel the young man I was to become...was fast approaching.

## Chapter 6

I was looking forward to playing football and wrestling at Arcadia High. Unfortunately, the school didn't have a wrestling team. Most kids would have been disappointed, maybe even a little upset, that their parents didn't look into the sports program within the school district before moving. Not me. As I said before, I didn't take sports as seriously as most. I figured I'd play basketball instead of wrestling.

Things went well with football, but I quit the basketball team for another sport that involved four-legged animals. It was called horse racing. Two blocks from the high school was a thoroughbred racetrack, Santa Anita. The first time I went to the track I made two bets, ate two hot dogs, drank a coke and came home with 80 cents more than I went with. I was hooked!

At that time you had to be 21 years old to make a bet, and without a parent you could not even get into the track. All my racing aficionado friends and I were only 16. Therefore, we had to be very innovative.

One time, I found some passes my dad had been given by the racetrack to be used for official business only. A friend of mine and I put on some suits and tried to pass for A.B.C. investigators, to no avail. The passes were confiscated at the admissions gate as we tried to enter.

My dad was not too overjoyed with us when we heard the news. I tried to explain to him how deeply upset I was...not so much that we did something wrong, but because we couldn't get in and we had two winners! (Sometimes dad didn't appreciate my sense of humor.)

Back then I had a variety of ways of getting money for the races. Besides working part-time at a fast-food restaurant, I would wrestle kids at school for money and, on occasion, my boss would back me in a boxing match behind the restaurant.

I used to go to the track with my two best friends, Joe and Bernie. (Joe was like a big, oversized, stuffed teddy bear, unless he was on the football field, and Bernie was a short, stocky, burly type.) In fact, we used to do a lot of things together. With Joe, it was playing football and going to the racetrack; and with Bernie, it was going to the racetrack and getting into fights.

One time Bernie and I were at a party. I was dancing with a girl from England when suddenly Bernie yelled at me, "Tom, we have a problem at the front door!" As I ran to the door with Bernie he told me that Dennis (a friend of ours) had gotten into an argument with a Marine, who was at a party in the apartment below us. The Marine threatened that he was going to come upstairs with his friends and kick the shit out of all

of us. Once we were at the front door, Bernie and I didn't see Dennis anywhere. (This was not the first time he had started something and then was not to be found!) Then there was this loud bang on the other side of the door and Marine starting yelling, "Open the fucking door or I'll kick it in."

Bernie and I just looked at each other and kind of shrugged our shoulders, then opened the door. The guy, dressed in his Marine uniform, looked at Bernie (who was noticeable bigger than me) and said, "I don't want to fight you. I want to fight that fucking Hollywood queer," pointing to me. (As if size should have mattered to the jerk; he was considerably bigger than even Bernie.) Then, as he was pointing, he tried to kick me. I stepped to the side and then I decked him. I was hitting him repeatedly when his friends came up and pleaded with me to stop. I stopped and let his friends pick him up off the ground and take him back to the party below. (He wasn't anxious to fight anyone anymore...especially a "fucking Hollywood queer.") As Bernie and I walked back into the living room, Dennis was coming towards us. We asked him where he had been, and he replied, "I had to go to the bathroom." Bernie and I just looked at each other and laughed.

I graduated from high school with a decent G.P.A., nothing to be proud of, but enough to get by. Then I looked at enrolling at a local junior college, one with a good football program. Bernie had gone into the Marine Corps Reserves, and Joe was going to attend Pasadena City College.

I finally decided on Citrus Junior College. It was close and had a decent football team. About a week before I was supposed to show up at Citrus for football tryouts, the assistant coach for Pasadena City College came to my house to see me. (It was a good thing for me he wasn't selling any swamp land!) He succeeded in convincing me to join Joe and play football at Pasadena City College.

The assistant coach had painted a pretty good picture, but when Joe and I showed up for the first day of tryouts, we were flabbergasted. There were a half-dozen guys going out for each position, and most of them had been first-string in their respective high schools. Plus, you had all the returning lettermen.

Joe made first-string offensive tackle. I was second-string defensive tackle, behind a fellow who had been named Junior College all-American the year before. He was about twice my size (I was one of the smallest defensive tackles in the league), but he was constantly injured, so I actually got a lot of playing time. I probably even played more than Joe, although he was much better; in fact, his second year he made all-American.

We had an excellent football team that year, winning nine games and losing three, and the coaches had even greater expectations for the next year. But once the season was over, I quickly put football out of my mind and started looking forward to the coming summer. I had an opportunity to go back to Minnesota and work during the summer for a concessionaire. We would be traveling throughout the Midwest, working fairs, carnivals, parades, and Indian powwows. (Good material for future grandkids, huh!)

## Chapter 7

The summer finally arrived, and my parents drove me to the Greyhound bus depot in El Monte. I convinced them not to wait to see me off, that I'd be fine. Then, instead of buying a bus ticket to Minnesota, I waited 5 minutes (to make sure my parents were really gone), walked three blocks to the freeway and stuck out my thumb. I was bound and determined to make that coming summer a true adventure, so I started off my hitchhiking across the country. I got pretty lucky and hitched rides all the way to North Dakota, without waiting too long in any one place. Once I hit North Dakota, however, finding rides was a bit more difficult.

One night, at around 2 in the morning, I was cold and tired and hadn't seen a car in several hours. An older man, driving by himself, stopped and offered me a ride. As we were driving down the road, he asked me where I was going and then started asking me about my family and my personal life. He mentioned that he had a son about my age and a daughter a few years younger. He seemed to be a decent sort, but after driving a few miles he made a sexually explicit suggestion to me. He wanted to hold my "thing" (that's what he called it) for the rest of the trip.

I didn't panic or anything, I just told him that I wasn't into that kind of stuff and I'd appreciate it if he would just pull over and let me out.

Once I was back on the dark, deserted highway, I remembered thinking how disappointed I was in that man. He supposedly had kids my age, and I trusted him. I wondered how he would have felt if his son were in that same situation (if he really had a son).

Now I was back on this godforsaken highway with no car lights in sight. Finally, about an hour later, an old, beat up pickup truck with two elderly farmers came driving by. They mentioned to me that it would be hard for me to get a ride on this highway at that time of the morning (as if I hadn't figure that out). They suggested that I go with them to their farmhouse and then in the morning they would drive me to a junction of the highway, where I could hitch a ride into Minnesota. I was still cold and tired, so I decided to take a chance and go with them.

Soon after, we pulled off the main highway and drove down a pitch-dark, rock-infested dirt road. After about 20 minutes of bouncing up and down, we came to a timeworn, wooden farmhouse. These farmers could have been mass murdered for all I knew. They could have butchered me, cut me into little pieces and buried me. Except for that degenerate man who had picked me up, nobody knew where I was.

I wasn't scared, but I was cautious and I kept thinking to myself that I better be prepared for the worst. When we went into the farmhouse, they pointed to a worn-out, dusty old couch and told me I could sleep there, while they proceeded to a back bedroom. I tried staying awake, but I was way too tired and eventually fell sound asleep. In the morning they work me up, fixed me a good, healthy breakfast, then drove me right to the location they had indicated to me the night before.

I got a couple more key rides and made it into Fergus Falls, Minnesota, later that afternoon. Fergus Falls wasn't too big a town, so I was able to find the concession company owner's record store without too much trouble.

When I walked into the store, a friendly, older lady greeted me. After I explained to her who I was, she went into the back room and called her brother, Muggs, the owner of the store. (She later described her brother to me as an older, grey-haired man, just over 6 feet, medium build, stern...but fair and very successful.) He told her that he would send his daughter, Alice, and the foreman of the concession company, Roger, to the store to pick me up. When I met Alice, who was a year younger than me, we immediately became good friends. An outdoorsman to say the least, she had dark hair, crystal clear complexion, stood 5 foot 2 and weighed about 100 pounds. Small framed, but evidently strong enough to lift herself up mountains and negotiate the strong rapids of the great Mississippi. Alice had this image of what California guys were like, and I guess she thought I fit that profile. (Confident, a little cocky and somewhat witty...hey, what can I say!)

As the summer went on, Alice and I became even closer friends, mostly because of the different events that summer. Like the time Alice was working an ice cream stand at a county fair and this older, obnoxious guy was giving her a hard time.

I happened by just as he was about to go too far. I took him aside and very diplomatically told him to get lost. He wasn't listening at first, so I took a more direct approach. He kept on mumbling something as he slithered away in pain. Alice really appreciated what I did, and I think it contributed to her fantasy of what California guys were all about.

There was this other girl who worked for the same concession company, and my relationship with her was anything but platonic. Her name was Carol, and this was her fourth summer working for Muggs. Carol was couple of years older than me. She was pretty, outgoing, and in general just a carefree girl. Carol had so much personality and great features (big tits) that it didn't take too long after we had met that I fell for her.

Right before the summer season started, Carol and I were living with all the other concessionaires at Muggs' house in Fergus Falls. At night Carol and I would sneak off



and take long walks together. I had never seen stars so bright and sky so spacious. Once the season started we would work a few fairs and carnivals together, but more often than not we would work separate spots and only see each other every couple of weeks. Actually, the anticipation of seeing each other at different places throughout the summer made it all the more exciting.

Working at all the different towns and events was a real experience. Like in Hutchinson, Minnesota, they sponsored a parade once a year and surrounded it with a 3-day carnival. There was the parade, the homecoming queen and her court, cheerleaders and marching bands. People lined the streets to see the parade in all its grandeur. I was selling popcorn, hot dogs, cotton candy and Cokes up and down the parade route.

It was a great situation to be in as it gave me the opportunity to meet and flirt with a variety of Midwestern girls. It was a period in my life when I had all the confidence in the world. It's hard to explain, but I knew it was just a summer job and when it was over I would be going home, back to school and back to my friends. So, the only thing I really had to lose that summer was not taking full advantage of it.

I remember working a powwow in Mobridge, South Dakota. The town had one rundown restaurant, one half-stocked grocery store, one gas station, a couple of civic buildings and about 15 bars. At night the streets would be wall-to-wall people walking from one bar to another with their drinks in hand.

Late one sultry night on the Fourth of July, we had finally closed the concession stand after what had been a very profitable day at the Indian reservation just outside of town. It was the first time I'd ever been to a powwow, and I must admit, I was pretty impressed with the pride of the people and their heritage.

I had met a local girl a couple of days before. Her name was Bonnie and she had just turned 18. (Bonnie was as spirited as the wild horses that romp through the Midwest and appeared to have been celebrating her birthday for the past week... nonstop.) Later that night, she, her 12-year-old sister Terri and I went for a walk down the main street in Mobridge. It was crowded as usual, with people drinking and celebrating. Then all of a sudden, out of the blue, some guy grabbed Terri by her long blonde hair and pulled her towards him. I reacted simultaneously. I turned, swung, hit him square in the face and knocked him to the ground. Then out of the corner of my eye I saw the flash of a knife. It just missed me, and the guy thrusting the knife lost his balance, which allowed me time to shove him into a brick wall, knocking the wind out of him. I quickly grabbed Bonnie and Terri and ran through the crowd, back toward the fairgrounds. Bonnie and her sister were a little shaken up and wanted to go home.

Once we got to their house, it was late, so we just said goodnight and agreed to talk in the morning.

Later that night I ran into Alice and we decided to have our own fireworks show. We found a nice grassy area at the fairgrounds and lit two big boxes of fireworks.

We talked about life in general and about our dreams. Then as we continued to talk, it became even more evident to Alice just how much of an eternal optimist I really was.

I told her of the all the adventures I wanted to have, including traveling to Alaska, the Amazon, the Orient, climbing vast mountain ranges and sailing the seven seas. (Kind of sounds like my grandfather's stories, huh? Oh well.) Alice on the other hand was more conservative and practical. She talked about having a career, getting married and raising a family. We also compared what type of person we were looking for to spend the rest of our lives with. Obviously, the girl who was looking for security would shy away from me, and some of them did (all right, a lot did)----especially when I talked about my dreams, and those dreams did not include being a doctor or a lawyer.

In thinking of the ideal girl, I didn't have a specific profile or any guidelines set in my mind. I just knew if she did not believe in a dreamer, our relationship would have little or no chance of working out.

The next morning I found out that the jerk who had pulled Terri by her hair was an old boyfriend of Bonnie's, and the guy with the knife was a friend of his. I also learned that they were driving around town looking for me. That really didn't worry too much because I was about to leave for another powwow a couple hundred miles away. I kind of got the feeling that maybe "little Miss Bonnie" was still seeing this so called "old boyfriend." No matter, I was on my way out of there.

A couple of days later, after a few more powwows, we went to Minot, North Dakota. It was unbelievable. I never in my life had seen so many pretty girls. We had just pulled into town and within a few hours I had three dates for that night.

I was like a little kid in a candy store. All three of them were beautiful, and I just couldn't help myself. Just as I'm trying to work out this dilemma, a truck pulls up and the driver yells out, "Tom, hop aboard. We're going to Montana." I had just enough time to grab my stuff and not a minute more. I didn't even have a chance to say good-bye to any of my dates.

I guess I could have been getting paid back for being so greedy, but whatever the reason, I would never get the opportunity to see those gorgeous girls again. There I was on a truck with three, not-so-gorgeous, male co-workers headed for some hick town in

Montana. (What a bummer!) Shelby wasn't really a hick town, but it was small. (Hey, I was pissed.)

Every summer the town would hold a three-day fair and rodeo at the county fairgrounds. Muggs had concession stands at this spot every summer for the last 20 years.

The first day we set up our stands at the fairgrounds, and then a few of us decided to drive into town. After a couple of hours of sightseeing, I ran into a girl who happened to be from good old California. She was your typical hippie of the sixties. Her name was Janice, and she had just moved to Shelby looking for work. I talked to the foreman about hiring her to work one of our stands. As it turned out, we were short of help, so it worked out well for everyone (especially me!).

After the opening night of the fair, Janice invited me back to her apartment. Even though I had enjoyed sleeping outside at the fairgrounds, I ended up staying the night at Janice's. The fringe benefits at her apartment outweighed the wide open spaces.

That second night we closed the stands about midnight and a bunch of us decided to go into town for breakfast. After we ate, we all went for a walk around town. There was myself, Janice, a 10-year-old boy, his older sister and a co-worker named Bob.

It was around 1:30 in the morning, 80 degrees and just a nice, peaceful night. We were trying to mind our own business, but when a hopped-up car came driving by, the 10-year-old yelled something to the four teenagers riding in it.

I never knew what the kid yelled...I wasn't really paying much attention...but the car made an abrupt U-turn in the middle of the street. It pulled up next to us, and one of the guys in the car yelled out to the kid, "What the fuck's your problem?"

I didn't particularly like the guy in the car cursing at the kid, but what really pissed me off was him trying to intimidate a little 10-year-old. When I told them to leave the kid alone, they started on me, and I knew it was going to develop into something bad. It didn't help matters when I told them all to go fuck themselves! That REALLY pissed them off, and they told me to meet them in the parking lot across the street.

I figured big, old Bob (he stood about 6 feet 5 inches and weighed close to 150 pounds) and I should be able to take the four of them. I told the others to wait there and motioned for Bob to come with me across the street. To my surprise, and believe me, great disappointment, Bob explained that he was against violence and didn't believe in fighting.

Just my luck, of all the 6 foot 5, 250-pound men in the world, I had to be with one who didn't believe in violence. (Go figure.) In all honesty, however, I could respect that. (I probably should have just kept my big mouth shut.)

Despite the fact I was by myself I went across the street anyway. As I came up to their car, I was thinking to myself, "How in the hell are you going to take on all four of them?" This was definitely not one of my brighter moves. Oh well, there was no turning back now, at least not for me. The back door of the car flew open, and mouthy punk jumped out and threw a beer bottle, hitting me square in the head and putting a big gash right above my right eye. (Just about the same place as Blackie's gash.) The blood started to pour down my face. Now I WAS really pissed off, and I just started hitting him. I hit him so many times in just a few seconds that he turned around and sprinted to the other side of the parked car. By now, my friends had come across the street and, along with the three other guys from the car, tried to convince me to stop fighting and go to the emergency room. The guy who threw the bottle even apologized and nervously tried to direct me to the hospital down the street. By now the blood was everywhere, so I let my friends walk me to the emergency room while the guys in the car drove off.

After the doctor stitched me up, the others went back to the fairgrounds. Janice and I went back to her apartment. Once there, she made sure that I felt "ALL" better. (Fighting does have its upside, even when you get the worst of it.)

Janice and I really got along well, to say the least, but the fair and rodeo were going to be over the next day, and I would be heading for New Town, North Dakota. For all intents and purposes, our relationship was over. We talked about seeing each other again, but we both knew it would never happen. We spent the last night together, and early in the morning we said our last good-byes.

Later that day I arrived in New Town. (A small town by anyone's standards----even Mobridge would be a city in comparison.) I was told that where the Mississippi River goes by the north part of town was where the professional speedboat races were held, at least that was until a couple of years ago. Unfortunately, three speedboats flipped over during competition and now the big yearly event was a four-day rodeo.

We ended up being in New Town for a week and during that time I learned some important lessons.

One lesson had to do with this one girl I was seeing, a lifeguard at the community pool. One night after the rodeo I was making out with her in a 1954 Chevy. The car and its steamed up windows was parked near the concession stands when someone came knocking on the driver's side window (guess who? Remember Carol?) Obviously, I wasn't expecting her at this spot. It took a few seconds, but I convinced the lifeguard to

go home and that I would see her in the morning. In the meantime, I was desperately trying to think what in the hell I was going to say to Carol.

I told her, “Yes, I was kissing that other girl, but the whole time I was kissing her, I was thinking of you.” Well, needless to say, when she stopped laughing, she left. I knew she would eventually get over it, but not until she made me pay!

The next day the rodeo continued. Carol left for another spot, and the lifeguard was not talking to me.

The rodeo had an amateur, saddle-bronco riding contest. I figured my luck with two-legged creatures wasn’t going too well, so I’d give a four-legged one a shot. I put up my \$10 for the entry fee (and no, I had never ridden a bronco before).

I was hustling popcorn in the grandstand when they announced, “Tom Knust from California, we need you behind the chutes.” I gave my popcorn tray to a co-worker to hold, took my apron off, ran down the bleachers and went behind the chutes. When I got there I realized that I didn’t have any cowboy boots and I needed the boots and I needed the boots to put spurs on to be able to spur the bronco. (That makes sense, doesn’t it?) Now I needed some help, so the announcer broadcast the following over the loud speaker, “Ladies and gentlemen, can I have your attention, please. We have a cowboy here, who came all the way from California and forgot his boots!” After the laughter died down, he continued, “Does anyone have a size 10 boot to help this cowboy out?” Embarrassment is an understatement. Then, as I’m sitting behind the chutes, a rugged old cowboy comes up to me and throws his boots to the ground. He never said a word; just turned around and climbed up onto the chute to watch.

I put the cowboy boots on and climbed up into the chute. I then mounted the bronco, grabbed hold of the rope and nodded to signal “I’m ready. Let him go.” They let him go, the chute opened and there I went. As soon as they opened the chute the bronco bucked once and I went flying. I mean not even half a second did I stay on. (Boots, who in the hell needed boots?) I got up, dusted myself off and went back to selling popcorn in the grandstand.

At least a couple of good things came out of it. After my embarrassing ride and the ‘cowboy with no boots’ remark, everyone in the grandstand started buying popcorn from me and just about every girl started to flirt with me. I never knew not succeeding at something could be so profitable and so much fun!

After the rodeo, I was cleaning up around the stand and noticed a raving lunatic yelling at a teenage girl. There were two other guys trying to calm him down. It also was apparent he had been drinking or was on drugs. He wasn’t wearing a shirt and had tattoos up and down his muscular arms, as well as all over his chest and back. I was

trying not to pay too much attention to him or the girl, thinking that his friends could control him. But when he slapped the girl, it was fairly evident they couldn't, so I butted in. I told him to leave the girl alone. In response, he turned towards me and told me to mind my own fucking business. He then continued to tell me in no uncertain terms that his friends could try and tell him what to do but not a fucking punk like me. All I wanted was for him to stop slapping the girl. "Listen to your friends," I told him, "and I'll butt out."

He turned towards her and yelled back at me, "If you don't butt out, I'll slap you like I'm going to slap this fuckin' bitch." Then he slapped her hard across the face. He came towards me, presumably to slap me also. I never minded someone slugging me, but I was damned if I was going to let another guy slap me! So, when he came up to me, jacking his jaws like a first class asshole, I nailed him three or four times. As he was lying on his back, I told him if he slapped the girl again I'd pound his fucking face in.

One of his friends came up to me and said he would take him home and that his other friend would take the girl home. Before they all left the girl came up and thanked me. She was pretty shaken up, but better off than she had been 10 minutes earlier.

I had a few relationships that summer; some worked out and others did not. One chance encounter that did not involved a Midwestern girl named Sue Blackman.

I was working the Big Sky Fair in Great Falls, Montana. I met Sue while she was working at another concession stand near mine. During our breaks and after work we would walk around the fair, take in the exhibits, and converse on all kinds of things. As we walked down the midway, she would periodically take her hand and brush her long dark hair away from her face. I can't explain it, but simple things like that made her even more attractive.

She was the daughter of a successful rancher. He was very conservative, very opinionated and under no circumstances did he ever want her dating anyone who traveled the fair circuit. Luckily for me, though, she respected her dad...but not his opinion.

Early one morning, about 2, we were walking down the deserted midway hand in hand. I was about to tell her how much I cared for her when, out of nowhere, a car came streaking down an area of the fairgrounds that was supposed to be restricted to foot traffic only. It came to a screeching halt, dust flew all over the place and all four doors swung wide open. Four bulky cowboys came bailing out. "Oh shit, my dad and my brothers," a panicked Sue exclaimed!

Before I could say anything, the father grabbed Sue, and the brothers pounced on me. Even if I had a chance to fight back, I didn't want to put Sue in anymore of an

awkward position then she was already in. Once her father had Sue in the car, her brothers let me up, warned me not to see her again and left.

The next day she failed to show up for work and no one could or would tell me if she were coming back. I tried phoning her, but with no success.

The fair ended a few days later, and I had to leave. I never did get a chance to tell Sue how I felt, and I never would know her true feelings. I figured, though, if she truly cared for me she would have made some attempt to get hold of me.

The summer was coming to an end, and our last spot was going to be in Billings, Montana. Everyone who worked the summer for Muggs worked this last spot, including Carol. Oh, by the way, she did finally forgive me; in fact, we spent most of our time at the fair together.

I learned one important thing during the summer from Muggs. He could sell ice cream when it was 60 degrees and sell coffee when it was over 100. There was an art in selling, and that art could be applied to many other things. "Get people to buy what you sell, for you don't always sell what they want to buy." Muggs Townsend...1966.

It also was very interesting working with the carnies throughout the summer. They were very loyal to each other and lived like the gypsies of yesteryear.

Sometimes after a fair would close for the night, they would get together and start a crap game. I got into a couple of their games and although I never did any good, I did learn a lot about carnies. Things like, if you're ever in trouble, yell, "Hey, rube" and they all would drop everything and come to your aid. (I liked that.) Also, if you were being hassled at a fair or carnival by other carnies, just say "I'm with it" and they'll leave you alone.

It would not be the life for me, but the for the summer it sure was educational.

All in All, I had many good experiences that summer and I met a lot of different people, but I was looking forward to getting back home.

The last night of the fair I said my good-byes to everyone, especially to Carol and Alice.

Later the next day I started hitchhiking back to California. At first, as before, I got real lucky on rides, but then I hit a real dry spell. It was about 2 in the morning, and I hadn't had a ride in over 3 hours. It was really cold, and I was getting a little discouraged until I noticed two fairly attractive girls and guy walking out of a local bar. They looked like they had been partying pretty good and then, for no apparent reason, they offered to give me ride until the sun came up (that's right, until the sun came up...

hey, they had been drinking!). That sounded pretty good to me, especially when I got in the back seat and noticed a couple of six-packs of beer and a bottle of tequila.

The guy was driving, one girl was in the front seat and the other girl was in the back seat with me. (I'll tell you one thing, timing is everything.) They were going to drive me until the sun came up, they offered to share their booze, and then later on the girl in the back seat even went on step further. Her name was Julie (she had legs that seemed to on from here to there and back again), and after a few beers and a couple of shots of tequila, we started to "really" get to know each other.

She was an extraordinary girl. It was like we had known each other for years. And for sure, I never had so much sec in the back seat of a car in all my life. I could only imagine what she could have done, if only she had more room. As the sun was coming up they pulled the car over to the side of the road. I said my good-byes, stepped out of the car and stretched my arms and legs.

Life is strange. One minute I was tired and cold, and the next minute I'm two hundred miles closer to home with a smile on my face.

You know, standing on that isolated road with the warm sun just coming up, contemplating the rest of my trip and reminiscing about what had just happened with Julie, I couldn't have felt any better.

After another ride or two, somewhere close to the Idaho border, I ended up near a railroad yard reminding me of what a stranger had told me early on in my travels.

"The fastest way to get to the West Coast is to hop a freight," he had advised. "All you do is go up to the engineer and ask him where the train is headed."

Putting the stranger's experience to work, I found a freight destined for Portland, Oregon, and hopped into an empty boxcar. Bingo, 10 hours later I woke up on the West Coast, rested and ready to continue hitchhiking.

Somewhere just outside Santa Barbara a rather bizarre incident happened. I was sitting in a crowded all-night diner about 3 in the morning. A middle-aged man in a wheelchair began hassling two young couples sitting in a corner booth.

Obviously irritated, the couples were trying to show the tolerance one normally would for a wheelchair-bound person, but he was becoming more and more obnoxious, yelling out all sorts of derogatory names.

This continued for 10 long minutes. You could tell the couples' patience was beginning to wear thin when suddenly the guy in the wheelchair said, "Ah the hell with you idiots."



To the astonishment of all in the room, he stood up, shoved the wheelchair away and walked out of the diner. The wheelchair, as it turned out, belonged to a man sitting in a booth next to the two couples. This guy was just some drunk who had come in and sat down in it uninvited. After the shock of the moment had passed, everyone enjoyed a good laugh. (Even the man who owned the wheelchair chuckled.) Such is life in an all-night diner at 3 in the morning.

In any event, I was soon back on the highway, and after a couple more good rides I made it back to my much anticipated destination...Arcadia.

## Chapter 8

It was a couple of days before football practice was to begin, and guess what...I wasn't in the best of shape. Most everyone else on the team, including my best friend Joe, had been working out all summer, pumping iron, running and building themselves up. A lot of them gained over 20 pounds during the summer, and most of it was pure muscle. Me, I probably lost over 10 pounds and never worked out. To say the least, I wasn't looking forward to that first week of football practice.

As it turned out it didn't take too long to get back into shape (well, in partial shape, anyway).

Then one day, after a long hard practice, I had just walked into the house and I noticed my mom had this faraway look in her eyes as she was hanging up the phone. She had been talking to Jerry Grady's mother. Mrs. Grady had called to let us know that she was just notified by an Army officer that Jerry had been killed in Vietnam.

She didn't go into too much detail with my mom, just that he was killed in a firefight somewhere in the northern part of the country.

I was as shocked as my mom was, and I didn't know what to say. One thing that came to my mind was the time I had gotten Jerry out of trouble. One problem with growing up is that you don't always have your family or friends around to keep you out of harm's way.

After that day, I had a lot of problems with football and school. I don't think it was Jerry's death itself, but an accumulation of things. In fact, my grades got so bad that I became ineligible to play football midway through the season. Even though I couldn't play in the remaining games, I could still scrimmage with the team, and by then it wasn't a big deal anyway.

The semester was about to end, and I had to make some decisions concerning the direction my life was going to take. Especially since my education looked to be on hold. Many of my friends were getting their draft notices as the war in Vietnam was heightening. I started thinking about the service. I figured if I were going to join a branch of the service, then I wanted it to be the one that had the reputation of being the toughest and hardest, which to me meant the United States Marine Corps.

When the semester was over, instead of registering for the following term, I headed for the nearest Marine Corps Recruit Station and signed up.

I can't remember when I told my parent about my plans, but after they found out, they were very supportive.

Eve though my dad was disappointed that I wasn't staying in school, his number one priority, always, was for me to do what I needed to do to be happy.

It was that attitude that gave me the leeway to explore things within myself and to make decisions in my life with conviction. My mom was also very supportive at that time. I know she thought about Jerry Grady and had fears about me going to Vietnam, but they never showed.

The next few months seemed to draft on, I knew I had a date with the Marine Corps coming up, so I tended to procrastinate. I then spent most of my last week of freedom just trying to get my affairs in order.

Now it was Friday, and induction day was Monday. I really didn't have anything planned for that night, but Joe and I were going to a party Saturday and I was looking at spending Sunday with Bernie in Tijuana.

Friday morning, I borrowed my brother's car to run a few errands. Then later that day I met a girl who turn out to have a profound influence on my life.

It was around noon when I drove up to a fast-food restaurant in Pasadena. When I spoke into the box to place my order, the female voice on the other end caught my attention immediately. I pulled up to the service window and joked with her as I paid, and to my delight, she quipped right back.

Her large, blue eyes stared at me...as if inviting me to let go of all my inhibitions. She had long blonde hair that was pulled back, accenting her captivating face; there was a high forehead, wildly magnetic...distinctive cheekbones and from what I could see, a body that wouldn't quit. She could as easily been walking down a ramp at a fashion show as serving hamburgers.

The timing might not have been right, but I just had to go for it. So, as she handed me my food, I quickly, with deep conviction, explained my situation and asked her to dinner that night. She didn't hesitate for a second to accept my invitation, and before I could say another word, told me where and when to pick her up. As I drove away, I had this certain feeling I had just met a very special girl and thought about her constantly as I continued my errands.

Six hours and an eternity later I picked Trish up and headed for the beach, hopefully for a romantic dinner. I immediately had the same comfortable feeling with her that I had with Carol and Janice during the summer. Our conversation was going well, when about 15 minutes into the trip we were blind sided in the middle of an intersection. Everyone involved in the accident emerged no worse for it, but my car (all right, my brother's car) was totaled. And instead of a nice romantic dinner at the beach,

Trish and I were sitting on a cold, hard curb waiting for Bernie to come and pick us up. If anything was going to bring out the beast in her I figured now was the time, but she didn't miss beat. She was just as witty as before and took everything in stride.

It wasn't exactly the way I had planned to start, or end, this relationship. As Bernie drove us back to Trish's house we continued our conversation and both agreed there was a definite attraction. I promised her that I would write from boot camp and that we would try it again when I got my first weekend pass.

Bernie and I returned to the car (what was left of it), had it towed to a garage and then went home to explain to my brother what had happened.

He immediately brought up the soap box racer incident. You would think after six years, my brother's vocabulary would be more diversified. Whether it was the pieces of his soap box or his car, neither had a chance in hell of getting where he threatened to put them!

Saturday night Joe and I were off to Venice Beach for a party. I met a girl and spent most of the party with her. Joe either got bored or ran out of energy about one in the morning and said he was leaving. I told him I would find my own way home and returned to the company of new found friend. She was no Trish, but fairly attractive. She lived just down the street from the party, and when it was over we walked down to her apartment where I spent the rest of the night. And for some very good reasons, I did not get any sleep. The next morning she drove me home.

I had just laid down when an annoying knock on the door interrupted my desperate attempt to get some sleep. It was Bernie, and he was ready to head to Tijuana. He wouldn't listen to any of my pleas of exhaustion, and, regrettably, I was headed for Mexico.

In Tijuana, I spent most of the afternoon in a daze as we went from bar to bar trying our best to kill as many functional brain cells as possible. In between one of our stops, Bernie was walking in front of me and somehow got into a beef with two older, rough-looking Mexicans. One pulled a knife on him, and that snapped me back to life. I was in no condition to be fighting, much less fighting a guy with a knife in, so in my most diplomatic manner, I persuaded the Mexicans that Bernie regretted his actions.

As we walked away, I kidded Bernie that if they followed us, I would take the big guy and he could have the little one with the knife.

We continued to part all night, and Bernie didn't drop me off at home until just a couple of hours before I was due to report to the induction center in Los Angeles. I wouldn't say that my parents were mad, because that would be an understatement...they

were livid. They couldn't understand how I could pick that night to stay out all night, and to be honest, neither could I.

Mom had wanted me to have a good night's rest and a solid breakfast. Instead, I hadn't slept in two nights, had the worst hangover of my life, and after a quick shower barely had time enough to grab a piece of toast before they rushed me to Los Angeles.

After an assortment of apologies from me and my parents' realization of the pain I truly was in, we said our good-byes and I entered the induction center.

From that minute on, the people there never gave me a chance to close my eyes for a second to regroup. I had never spent a longer day in my life. I had to be examined by a dispassionate doctor, fill out lengthy forms, stand in long lines, get lectured to and endure an assortment of other pain-in the-ass rituals. I felt these things were designed specifically to torture people who had gotten no sleep and had a menacing hangover. It wasn't until around six that night that we filed into a bus and headed for the Marine Corps Recruit Depot. For such a short trip, Los Angeles to San Diego, it was an awfully long bus ride, which kept my mind in the past for quite awhile.

We finally arrived at the Recruit Depot, and it was there that I heard the words that brought me back to the present. "All right you fucking maggots, get the fuck out of the bus." The drill instructor wanted to make sure we knew exactly where we were. (Whether I liked it or not, the past was the past...the future started now.)

## Chapter 9

When we got off the bus, we were immediately told to stand at attention for our initial introductions to the drill instructors. Drill instructors seemed to come in only two varieties---either a big hulk of a man who seemingly could catch a falling redwood tree, or some scrawny punk you could knock to the ground with a backhanded slap. Regardless, they were well versed in four-letter words that Webster failed to include in its million-word dictionaries.

Intimidation was the name of the game. Some recruits were very much taken aback by it, others were just confused. Like when one of the redwood catchers put his face within an inch of one of the recruits and asked him if he liked his sister. The recruit started to answer that he didn't even know the D.I.'s sister, but before he could finish, the D.I. demanded that he only answer the question with a "Yes, sir" or "No, sir," nothing else.

"Yes, sir," the nervous recruit said.

"Would you like to fuck my sister?" the D.I. asked. "No, sir," was his answer.

"Oh, my sister isn't good enough for you?"

"No sir, I mean yes, sir," the flustered recruit mumbled, beginning to realize there was no correct answer in this situation.

"So you do want to fuck my sister?" the D.I. concluded.

That was just the beginning. As we waited apprehensively in line, other D.I.'s flung obscenities at us at will. "Fucking maggots" was one of their favorites. It got to where when one called us cowards, we almost took it as a compliment. In any event, I knew they didn't know me personally, so whatever they said, I just ignored it. (And for damn sure, I didn't want to know that D.I.'s sister.)

Many recruits did take the insults personally, and they were the ones who had the most problems.

I remember standing in line, waiting to get my head shaved, and thinking how the Marine Corps had everything down to an exact science...how many millions of recruits had gone through what we were going through now.

Part of the strategy was to strip you of your personal possessions brought from home. They would line us up in rows and have us box up the possessions, which would be shipped either to our parents or, in some recruits' cases to their wives.

As I was packing my stuff, I noticed a black kid from Chicago was sending everything home except a shiny, nickel-plated .45 caliber pistol. I leaned over and told him that if the D.I.'s found it, they would throw his ass into the guardhouse. I took the pistol and put it into the box with the rest of his belongings.

No more than a minute passed when I saw an Indian kid from New Mexico pack everything except a 10-inch steel blade knife. He had it partially hidden underneath his duffel bag, which contained our recently-issued G.I. clothing. I repeated my explanation and put the knife into his box.

I guess some recruits anticipated that the Marine Corps was tough and felt they had to bring an assortment of weapons to protect themselves.

After all the hassling, getting our gear, and our haircuts, we finally were assigned to our barracks. It was around 2:30 in the morning, and I had never been so beat in all my life. I was even too tired to be made at Bernie for talking me into going to Tijuana and getting smashed. All I wanted was to life down and close my eyes.

Finally I was able to do just that, but it was short-lived. I couldn't have been asleep an hour when I was awakened by a nice, gentle voice saying, "All right you fucking assholes, get you fucking asses out of your fucking bunks. Now!"

I wanted to die right there and then. It was like I was being punished for every wrong thing I ever did in my life.

Eventually I did catch up on my sleep, but not until at least the second week of boot camp. Once that happened I was fine, but getting to that point was pure misery. Boot camp turned out to be the most restricting, regimented experience I had ever had.

In boot camp you can't express yourself. You have to control your emotions, and you better not even think about getting into a fight. It is a situation that teaches you to react when you are given an order and not to question it. I found it very interesting to watch the D.I.'s try to mold naïve recruits from Kentucky, pimps from New Orleans, drug dealers from L.A., and gang members from Chicago. They were all very strong-willed individuals. The D.I.'s job was to get the individuality out of us so that we would fit into the Marine Corps regime.

I pretty much knew what the Marine Corps wanted out of me, and for the most part I gave it to them. For a lot of other recruits, it was difficult to adjust to the different situations. Hard or not, there wasn't much choice for any of us...the Marine Corps now told us when, where, and how to do everything from morning to night.

Three of the many recruits that the D.I.'s were trying to mold (carp, the Indian from New Mexico; Stew, a black recruit from the L.A.; and Cono, a white kid from the

Bay Area) became good friends of mine. Cono (short and compact, light blonde hair, with the looks of a 12-year-old kid) was probably the most athletic in the whole company. Carp (as short as Cono, but more pudgy than stocky, had distinctive high cheekbones giving him the unmistakable look of a true red-blooded Indian) excelled in all the written examinations but was not very proficient in the physical department. Stew (tall and slender, with the thinnest lips I'd ever seen on anyone) and I were pretty good in both areas. As it turned out, we all would help each other with both the physical and written examinations. At night we would get together and talk about our pasts, our futures, the Marine Corps, the D.I.'s, and a myriad of other subjects.

Part of the training that I was able to help Carp, Stew and Cono with was our drills with the pugil sticks, long poles with padding on both ends. The D.I.'s would line us up one-on-one, each with a pugil stick which would be used to simulate a rifle with a bayonet. The technique came easily to me. In fact, whenever any of the top brass would come by to observe us, the D.I.'s would call me to the front to demonstrate one-on-one the correct and most effective way to use the pugil stick.

At the end of the our instruction period, the D.I.'s held a contest for the whole company. If you struck your opponent in the kill zone, you won that match. The final match came down to me and a 6 foot 3, 200 pound, not too friendly, very loudmouthed recruit. We paired off, and within a few seconds I struck him in the kill zone...not once, but twice.

Then there was our next instruction course, hand-to-hand combat. Most of the maneuver they showed us, my past had already taught me...and that was fortunate for Stew, Carp, and Cono. They needed my help.

At the end of the hand-to-hand combat training course, as with the pugil sticks, we had a contest between platoons. In this case the recruits themselves chose four of their fellow recruits to compete.

My platoon chose me. The rules were simple...there were none. The first person to slap the mat lost. My first opponent tried to kick me, then he tried to tackle me, which allowed me a chance to traverse him and slam him down to the mat. With my forearm, I drove his head into the ground. Without any hesitation, he slapped the mat in defeat.

Next I fought the winner of the other match. My opponent was very large and just as intimidating, but lucky for me he was also a bit on the slow side. After a couple of minutes (it seemed longer) of both of us getting in our best shots, I was able to take him down to the mat. I had him in a hold that was virtually impossible to get out of, but I couldn't get him to slap the mat.



We were at an impasse. He couldn't move, but I wasn't hurting him enough to make him give up. I was getting tired and knew I had to take more aggressive action. About 3 inches from my mouth was his big ugly ear...it was too tempting. I bit down on it as hard as I could. Three long seconds later he slapped the mat.

When we got up, he took exception to the verdict, insisting that the hadn't surrendered, and wanted to continue. I was exhausted from the effort I expended holding him to the mat and had no desire to continue. He was basically fresh because he hadn't been able to move. He might have killed me if we continued, and I didn't argue when the D.I.'s stuck to their "no rules" and allowed the original decision to stand.

One of the final instruction courses was at the rifle range at Camp Pendleton. We were going to spend a week there, so we packed up our gear and headed for our new barracks.

The first day at Camp Pendleton we familiarized ourselves with the M-12 rifle. We also went on a 5-mile run...one of the least strenuous activities of the day. Later, about one in the morning, three D.I.'s came into our barracks completely bombed. They were yelling and screaming, calling us all kinds of names, grabbing recruits and tossing them out of their bunks into the showers, trash bins, and toilets. They slammed some unsuspecting souls against the wall and punched some in the stomach and others in the face. While all this was happening, another recruit and I grabbed a couple of brooms, went outside, and watched everything from there.

We figured if any of the D.I.'s caught us out there, we would just tell them that the other D.I.'s told us to police the area. As it was, any recruit that came within eye contact with any one of the D.I.'s would either be roughed up or have all of his property dismantled.

When the D.I.'s left, the barracks were in shambles. It looked like a hurricane had hit it. Not one of those weak fronts, but a full scale, barren-down-the-hatches storm. Everyone, except me and the other recruit outside, had their bunks and gear thrown from one end of the barracks to the other. Some of the recruits' faces were pretty bloodied, and other recruits were a little humiliated.

The next day we went to the rifle range. I had been shooting since I was 9 years old. My dad and brother would take me hunting all the time, so I had no trouble qualifying, nor did Stew or Carp.

Cono was a little shaky. He would jerk the trigger instead of squeezing it, but with a little help from his friends, he squeaked by. Everyone had to qualify before we could return to the Recruit Depot in San Diego. Eventually, all did.

Once back, we had to take our final written and physical examinations. Few failed the written part, but some did considerably better than others. The physical part included sit-ups, push-ups, chin-ups, and an obstacle course. We all tried to help each other out, either by verbal encouragement or as with the obstacle course, actually physically making one another move our asses faster.

The recruits that did not make it this far were not able to handle either the physical part, the discipline or the intimidation from the D.I.'s. But for those us who did, it was at this time we became a unit. And as a unit, we started looking out for one another.

This was also one of the most exciting times because we received our M.O.S., or Military Occupational Specialty. This would be the type of work we would be doing for the remainder of our careers in the Corps. Some would be cooks, some mechanics, others would be radio operators, infantry soldiers, or artillery gunners.

I wanted infantry. I wanted to be a Marine grunt and was thrilled when it came down. Carp, Stew and Cono were also assigned to the infantry, although they weren't quite as thrilled. That night the biggest topic of conversation among the four of us was about Vietnam. With our M.O.S., we knew it wasn't a matter of if we were going, but when.

That night, the D.I.'s talked to us for the first time as fellow Marines. They told Carp, Cono, Stew and me that we would be going to Camp Pendleton for Advance Infantry Training and would receive further assignments from there. They speculated that since the war was escalating, we probably would not be spending very much time in the States.

Finally, graduation day arrived. We spent all morning shining our shoes, cleaning our rifles and mentally going over drills we had practiced every day for 9 weeks. We wanted everything just right so that our marching in the quad would be perfect.

The anticipation of graduation was immense for all the recruits. Our relatives were coming to watch, and, for the first time in a long while, we would be able to communicate with the outside world.

After the graduation ceremony, it was good to see my parents and grandparents and the look of pride on their faces. All of this was short-lived, though. After visiting with them for a while, I was back in the barracks preparing for the following day when I would be transferred to Camp Pendleton.

## Chapter 10

That morning Carp, Stew, Cono and I arrived at Camp Pendleton, and once there we were assigned to the same barracks. Like the other recruits, we were looking forward to the upcoming weekend because we had been promised a weekend pass...our first in the 2 months we had spent in the Marines.

We also had our initial access to a telephone. The first person I called was Bernie and arranged for him and Dennis to pick me up that following Saturday. Next, I called Trish. That was the call I was looking forward to most during the 2 months. We walked for a short time and then made a date for that coming Saturday night.

There wasn't much chance for me to concentrate on anything but Trish during that week. I could only hope they weren't going to have instruction on anything important (like what to do if you were in a mine field, or something like that).

Later that first day, we were issued our gear and settled down in the barracks. A gruff, old sergeant, about 5 foot 10, 170 pounds, came in and told us to get a good night's sleep...that we would be needing it. He was right. They work us up about 4, fed us breakfast about 5 and had us marching through the hills by 6.

We hiked through the treacherous, barren hills of Camp Pendleton for some eight grueling hours. The hikes would be interrupted every once in a while for exercises that simulated combat situations we might encounter in the jungles of Vietnam. Mock villages had been established, complete with booby traps and all.

During our breaks in maneuvers and training, everyone migrated into their own selected groups. Unfortunately, some groups tried to control or intimidate others, not unlike street gangs back in the real world.

Once, four black Marines who were playing craps invited me and Stew into the game. One of them threw down a hundred-dollar bill and told us we could have part or all of it. Stew told him he was faded. I took \$60 and Stew took the rest.

The black Marine threw the dice, and his point was six. Then he dropped them right in front of him, not really rolling them, and said, "Schooling." He kept dropping the dice, time after time. I had played craps for many years, but I'd never seen anything like this.

After he had done this for about the fifth time, a seven came up, but he continued to roll. Stew and I thought he was still schooling or whatever it was he called it. Then the dice came up a six and he started to reach for the money. Stew grabbed the money first and told him he didn't know what this term schooling meant, but a seven came up before the six and he wasn't getting the money.

The Marine argued that it was his money because we didn't call the fucking seven. The term schooling, he explained, was only for that one roll of the dice; then he started to get belligerent and told us that he and his friends called the shots around there. He pointed at me and said, "You, white boy, you better get with the fucking program."

He told Stew not to be hanging around fucking white boys anymore, and then tried to grab the money from his hand. I turned and nailed him with a right cross. Stew hit one of the friends, and I ended up decking the other two. (The one black Marine throwing the dice was actually pretty good-sized and a little on the tough side. The other three, to be blunt, were just plain wimps.)

As fast the fight started, it ended, as a number of Marines separated us. Stew and I ended up keeping the money, and as for who called the shots...that no longer was an issue.

However, it was evident (again) that this was not going to be an easy place for me to stay out of trouble.

A few days later, we were heading back to the barracks after being in the field all day. It was dark, and we were hiking up a pretty steep hill. Just in front of me was a solidly muscled black Marine showing a slightly overweight Mexican Marine who was having trouble keeping up.

After he shoved the Mexican for the third time, I grabbed him by the arm and told him if he pushed the guy one more time I'd knock him on his ass. (His arm, by the way, was too big to grasp, and I had my doubts I could accomplish what I had threatened.)

He looked at me for a second, then muttered that he would take care of me at a later time. We hiked for about another hour; there were no more shoving incidents, even once back at the barracks nothing more developed.

The next morning, however, we lined up for breakfast, a fiend of mine told me that he had heard about the pushing incident. He went on to tell me the black Marine I grabbed was an ex-logger from Washington who apparently had a very bad reputation. Also he had heard that the guy had told some of his friends that he was going to kick the shit out of me.

Just as I was telling my friend not to worry about it, the ex-logger came walking up to me. He had a pair of leather gloves in his hand, and as he started talking "trash" to me, he started to put his gloves on, one finger at a time. While he was pushing the gloves down on each finger, he unequivocally said to me, "No white oy tells me what to

do, and no fucking white boy ever touches me.” (I think a lot of blacks were running this white boy thing into the ground.)

We’ll I’m not stupid. I figured once he got both gloves on he was going to pop me. He had the gloves about halfway on and was still talking in such a way, as if he were trying to scare me to death (right!). So I didn’t hesitate, I hit him about give or six times before he knew what was happening.

This time, everybody kind of scattered as they saw a couple of sergeants coming down the road. The ex-logger’s friends picked him up and assisted him to the back of the company. The sergeants did not see any of the incident, and the guy never bothered me again.

Intimidation, whether based on race or not, seemed to be constant during those early days. Everyone wanted to prove how tough they were. If you allowed the intimidation, it only got worse. If you stood up to it, it would generally end.

Whenever I experienced any situation involving intimidation, bullies, or anything along those lines, it would remind me of a story my dad once told me when I was just a little boy. When he was growing up, there was a bully who lived in his neighborhood who would take all the local kids’ candy and intimidate them constantly.

One day my dad was being chased by the bully, and as he ran past his neighbor, who was an elderly man, the neighbor yelled out, “Why are you running?” My dad, out of breath, pointed behind him and replied, “He’s going to beat me up.” His neighbor smiled and shook his head, “You don’t have to run. You can take that kid!” “You really think so?” my father asked. “Sure,” the man answered without any hesitation. So my father turned around and waited for him to catch up. He then, to his surprise and without too much difficulty, proceeded to beat up the neighborhood bully...and as the word spread, my dad became somewhat of a local hero. (Pretty cool, huh!)

Saturday finally arrived and we were all anticipating our first weekend pass. The sergeants called us out into the quad, all 120 of us, presumably to tell us what we wanted to hear. As I was standing there, I could see Bernie and Dennis standing on the other side of the fence waiting to give me a ride back home. I couldn’t wait to get into the car.

Then came the bombshell, a surprise inspection of our rifles. Anyone who failed the inspection would have his pass voided. There were maybe three Marines prepared (these guys must have lived their entire lives by the Boy Scout Code) and I certainly was not one of them. The rest of us failed. I couldn’t believe I wasn’t going home.

As we were being dismissed from formation, I overheard some of the sergeants telling a number of the others to clean up their rifles and come see them for their pass.

The sergeants hardly had time to know any of us. We were all in fatigues and wearing helmets, and I thought to myself, “How in the hell are they ever going to remember who they talked to?”

While all the other dejected Marines were throwing their helmets to the ground and banging their lockers, I started to clean my rifle from top to bottom. When I was finished, I went to a sergeant with my rifle in hand. He didn't even bother to look at it, he just handed me a pass.

I turned right around and started walking as fast as I could, just about breaking into a run while holding my breath until I reached the barracks. I took a short minute to change and rushed to the front gate. Bernie and Dennis were just standing there, waiting, unaware of what had just transpired. I told them to get to the car as fast as they could and to get us the hell out of there.

On the way back to Arcadia, we filled each other in on what had taken place during the past 9 weeks...in truth, though, the only thing on my mind was seeing Trish that night. After they dropped me off, I visited with my parents for a while, then I called her.

When Trish first answered the phone, she sounded really excited that it was me, but her enthusiasm soon left her voice. Then came my second bombshell of the day. She told me that she had gotten back with her ex-husband about a month earlier, but couldn't bring herself to tell me about it before. An emptiness came over me. I didn't even know she had been married and worse yet they were back together! I'd rather have been torn apart by one of those Marines in that farce of a crap game than to have heard the words Trish had just spoken.

Despite the news, we continued to talk. I was trying to hide my despair as best I could, and I sensed she was doing the same. By the end of our conversation, I felt strongly that if she hadn't returned to her ex-husband, our relationship could have been the real thing. At least she agreed to have lunch with me the next day. I was down, but I knew I was far from being out.

That night, my parents still thought I was going out with Trish, and I didn't give them any reason to think otherwise. Instead, I just went to a local run-down bar where I had been served alcohol since I was 16 years old. I had a few beers and a lot of self-pity. I just couldn't get Trish off my mind. It got to be midnight, and I decided to go home.

As I was putting my key into the lock on my car door, three obnoxious older men started yelling obscenities at me. I wasn't in the best of moods, had absolutely no patience for the morons who had been drinking in the parking lot, and told them to fuck off. (I've got to learn to keep my big mouth shut!)

One, about 6 feet, 190 pounds and who had the appearance of having been in a few scrapes, took exception to my comments and said they were toing to beat the shit out of me. I took the key out of the door lock and put it back into my pocket.

“Which one of you assholes is going to do it.” I asked sarcastically. It didn’t take them long to answer in unison, “All three of us!” (I never said I was a rocket scientist.)

When they came up to me, I hit one and knocked him to the pavement. But as I was struggling with the other two, the one of the ground grabbed my legs, and I fell hard to the ground. Before I knew it, all three were on top of me, punching and kicking as hard as they could. I supposed I could have yelled and my friends in the bar would have come to my rescue, but I didn’t. I guess I still thought I could handle the three of them. Just as I felt I was going to be able to get up, a car came by and a man yelled at the three of them. They ran off.

They had cut my lip pretty good and I had a few scrapes, but thing serious. I went back into the bar to use the rest room and wash the blood off. As I was standing bloodied at the sink, an old man (about 80) who was fixed in front of the urinal looked over at me and, as nonchalant as a person could be, asked, “Had a bad day, id?” I just smiled and answered. “I’ve had better.” “I surely hope so,” he replied, as he missed the urinal far to the right. (Guess which smells the most on your clothes, blood or urine?...not my day!)

The next day I met Trish for lunch. We talked and laughed for about 2 hours. I just felt so much at ease with her. It was the strangest thing...I mean, we had one aborted date, two phone calls and a lunch, and I felt like I was falling in love with her.

As we were saying good-bye, she said it would be nice if we kept in touch and that she thought about me often. Well, that was like shooting a 110 on the golf course...but parring the last hole.

Later than afternoon, Bernie drove me back to Camp Pendleton where I was going to resume Advance Infantry Training the next day.

That night back at the barracks, there were a lot of long faces. Every Marine who wasn’t able to get a weekend pass seemed very dejected. I had a pass and felt worse than they did. But then the more I thought about it, there were a lot of positive points that were brought out by the events that past weekend. One was how innovative I could be on the spur of the moment.

Like the time Joe’s brother, Andy, and I were leaving a bar in Arcadia. Andy was a pretty bright guy sober but when intoxicated his I.Q. would drop considerably. We had started up the street on our way to another local establishment, when all of a

sudden Andy bolted to a parked car where a couple were passionately making out. He then knocked hard on their window, turned and ran away. Actually kind of limped away; Andy had some severe physical problems. He was just kidding around, but this huge, mean-looking character (maybe not so huge, but sure mean enough) jumped out of his car like he was Mr. Macho Man and started yelling at both Andy and me. Honestly, I really couldn't figure out why he was upset with me. Andy I could understand.

I tried to explain to him that Andy had been drinking and he really didn't mean any harm. The guy really didn't want to hear it; it just seemed that he was bent on kicking the crap out of both of us. I started walking towards him and tried one more time to persuade him not to take Andy so seriously.

He continued insulting and threatening me. When I got right up to him, I suppose he thought I was going to continue arguing with him, but by then I had lost my patience and I slugged him. He grabbed me around my waist as his knees were buckling and held on as tight as he could. Just then, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed the flashing lights of a police car and at that exact moment I raised my hands and started yelling, "Leave me alone, leave me alone." Words that I never thought would come out of my mouth in a million years (but pretty damn smart on my part), because the next thing I knew, the cops grabbed the guy, threw him on top of his car and handcuffed him.

The guy started yelling at the cops, threatening them that he had connections at City Hall. The cops told him to shut his mouth and then questioned me on what happened. I lied a little (all right, just maybe a tad more than a little) and told them that he had swung at me first and all I was trying to do was get away from him. As far as the cops were concerned, that jibed with what they saw, and the other guy wasn't helping his cause any by threatening to have all their jobs. So, as good cops doing their job should do, they asked me, the victim, if I wanted to press charges.

I told them, as I was biting my tongue, that it wasn't that big of a deal. They told me to go and then instructed the other guy, as they were taking the handcuffs off, to go straight to his car and leave the area right away. They also told him if he went back into the bar, they would arrest him.

The guy told the cops he wasn't going to leave and he was going into the bar to call their fucking bosses. As Andy and I reached our car, we could see the guy heading straight back towards the bar. Then we saw the cops throw the not-so-bright guy to the ground, handcuff him again and then pick him up and toss him into the squad car. I told Andy, there's a guy who had the night made, with his girlfriend and all, but because



he was a macho jerk, he ends up getting beat up, being thrown in jail, and if his girlfriend had an ounce of sense, lost her, too.

After thinking about that story and other situations that I had been in, I started feeling my self-confidence returning. I wasn't going to let my situation with Trish keep me depressed. Besides, deep down, I felt Trish and I would get together someday. (That had something to do with parring that last hole.) in the meantime, Cono had shown me some pictures of his sister. She didn't look too bad, so I figured I'd get her phone number and see where that led. (Hey, I was rejected, not put to death.)

That next morning, we were right back at it, going on long marches from early in the morning to late at night. We were also being given a lot of intensive combat training, more than ever before.

Later that week I gave Cono's sister a call. Her name was Linda. We agreed to meet for dinner that following Saturday night.

Linda sounded awfully good on the phone. If she looked half as good in person as her picture, I was thinking she might take my thoughts off Trish, although Trish still occupied much of my mind and I was still optimistic that something could come of our brief acquaintance.

Saturday morning Bernie, Dennis and Joe drove to Camp Pendleton to pick me up. We were going to go to the races at Hollywood Park during the afternoon, and that night I would be going out with Linda.

There were no surprise inspections this time, and we were literally off to the races. None of us got lucky at the track, so we decided to leave early, and on the way home Bernie wanted to stop at a fast-food restaurant in Watts.

Watts and the surrounding area were 90 percent black, and racial tensions during that time were at their highest. It wasn't the best area for four white teenagers to be hanging out, but it was still daylight, and we were just going to have a hamburger.

We were sitting at an outside table. I was waiting for the others to finish their food when a tall, well-built black man and his rather large girlfriend approached Joe, demanding money. He said he and girlfriend were hungry.

Neither one looked like they had missed too many meals lately, and Joe told him if he thought they really needed something to eat, he would gladly help them out...but in this case, Joe told him to try somebody else.

At that point, the black man got right in Joe's face and called him a fucking punk and again demanded money. Even though Joe was a lot bigger than any of us, he wasn't

a fighter, so I couldn't help myself, I had to intervene. (What can I say.) I told the guy, "Quit being such an asshole and leave us alone."

That went over like a lead balloon, and he immediately wheeled around. "What the fuck did you call me?" he directed towards me. "Go ahead, motherfucker, call me an asshole one more time." Now he's right in my face. "Come on, punk, call me an asshole one more time, motherfucker." (Guess what?)

Having always been one to oblige a request, I called him an asshole. He started to swing...I ducked...and he missed. Then I decked him with a left jab. The workers inside the restaurant had been observing the incident, and the second the fight broke out, they bolted the doors and placed iron bars on the windows. It was obvious they had a lot of practice at that drill.

I had this guy on the ground with his face shoved into the concrete when a red, four-door sedan came screeching around the corner and pulled up in the parking lot. Four huge black men got out, opened the trunk and each grabbed baseball bats that looked like tree trunks. (Babe Ruth would have died for bats like those.)

To the credit of Bernie, Dennis and Joe, they stood their ground as we were approached by the four men. My only thought was how I was going to get one of those bats in my hand. This was not one of the better situations we had ever been in.

The four men, however, were not interested in beating out brains out. Quite the contrary. They were part of a local patrol to help prevent such incidents between blacks and whites and had been called by the people in the restaurant.

I let the guy get up from the ground but he was still irate. He headed for his car yelling that he had something there that would take care of us all.

When a gun appeared, Bernice, Dennis, Joe and I headed quickly for the car. (Hell...quickly...if the horses we had just be on would have run half as fast, we would have still been at the track.)

On the way back to Arcadia, we talked continuously about the incident. Typical of the four of us, however, we didn't take it as seriously as it probably was.

Once home, I took a fast shower, got dressed, and went to meet Linda for the first time. When I arrived, a small problem had arisen. Linda's old boyfriend had called her earlier, and she agreed to go to a party with him that night. She was now in a rather awkward position, but she told me she had a simple solution. She had fixed me up with her best friend! (Why not!)

I was a bit early, and it was going to be a while before my date or Linda's boyfriend arrived, so we sat and talked. (Oh, by the way, she did look better than her

picture, all 5 feet 4 inches, 120 pounds of her.) And to make an awkward situation even worse, we were attracted to one another. So attracted, in fact, that we planned date...not for another night, but for THAT night.

I think Linda was going for some kind of record. She agreed to a blind date with me, broke our date; agreed to go out with her old boyfriend; set me up with her best friend; planned to ditch her boyfriend early; and asked me to cut my blind date short so that we could go out later that night.

The bottom line was, Linda was different, exciting, and record or not, I was willing to take my chances. And after we said good night to our respective dates, we met a friend's apartment. We talked and drank beer for 3 hours, then adjourned to the back bedroom and made love for what seemed to be an eternity (she had this special way of... well, never mind). In parting, we decided to see each other every weekend I could get away from Camp Pendleton. (Weekends that were going to be well spent.) (By the way, there was one more thing, she had one breast about three-quarters the size of the other, not that I was complaining...just pointing it out.)

## Chapter 11

The day finally came...four whole months after I stepped off the Greyhound reject. We got our orders for Vietnam, all 120 of us. The reaction among everyone was the same...positive and anxious. When I got home that weekend, I told my parents the news. They were very supportive and tried not to show their concern.

I sensed concern, however. My parents were the type that wouldn't want me going to Vietnam worrying about both the war and them. They knew I would already have enough on my mind.

When I told gramps, his reaction was positive and strong. He was always very patriotic. But I did sense some guilt...as if he thought his stories and wild tales had sent me in this direction. I assured him that this was what I wanted and not to worry.

Next, I talked to Linda. She already knew from her brother that we were headed for Vietnam. She was pretty emotional and didn't want to see either me or Cono go. We saw as much of each other as we could before I had to leave, but the last phone call I made was to Trish.

Trish and I talked for hours. I told her that I still thought about her often, and she admitted she was having second thoughts about staying with her ex-husband.

We decided to let fate dictate what happened between us and as soon as I returned from Vietnam we would try and see one another again. (There I go, parring that last hole again.)

My last good-byes were to my parents. Dad was strong and exuded confidence in me. Mom was also strong, but had the look only a mother who was seeing her son off to war could have.

The day we were to leave for Vietnam, Carp, Stew, Cono, and I packed our gear and loaded up on a Marine bus headed for the air station in El Toro. We had a wise ass sergeant driving, who told us, "Enjoy yourselves now, grunts. Only a few of you will be coming back."

None of us took him too seriously, although we should have.

It seemed a little strange once we were aboard the plane. It was a TWA flight, and the stewardesses served and treated us like we were a football team headed for the big game.

In fact, everybody's attitude on the plane was very nonchalant. Nobody seemed to be really thinking about where we were going. No, we were joking and flirting with the stewardesses. None of us had any idea of what lay ahead.

We stopped over in Okinawa, where we were assigned to our new battalions. Of course, Stew, Cono, Carp and I were hoping to get the same assignment, but we were all separated. In fact, once we did get to Vietnam, we would never see one another again.

That night, our last night and only night in Okinawa, everyone went to the local watering hole; Stew and I must have downed more than a dozen beers each. All I remember from that night is nearly passing out on the way back to the barracks and two M.P.'s picking us up off the ground and helping us into our bunks. (Oh yes, I also remember the hangover.)

## Chapter 12

Our first destination in Vietnam was Da Nang, a central point for troop travel in northern South Vietnam. Da Nang was a good sized city...modern by Vietnam standards. Or, at least it was at one time. By now, the effects of the war had taken their toll in a big way. In any event, my stopover there would be short. While I was waiting to board a plane for my next destination, Dong Hoi, where I would meet up with the Second Battalion, Ninth Marines, I struck up conversations with other Marines, many of whom had completed their tours and were headed home.

The Ninth Marines, they told me, had the nickname "Hell in a Helmet." In stemmed from the fact that they would carve their until "2/9" on the foreheads of the North Vietnam soldiers they had killed.

It's hard to explain, but when they assured me Dong Hoi was currently the hottest spot in the entire country, I was actually anxious to get there. I guess it was a feeling similar Cassius Clay's as he was waiting to get into the ring with Sonny Liston. Liston hadn't just beaten his opponents, he had destroyed them. Nobody except Clay really WANTED to fight him. He had no fear of Liston, and to the derision of most, he KNEW he was going to win. It was Clay's optimism that I finally boarded a small troop plane headed to Dong Hoi.

DAY ONE...

Dong Hoi was north of Da Nan, about 8 miles south of DMZ (demilitarized zone). As we started our descent, the pilot shut off the engines and we just sort of dropped in. Planes could not make a normal sweeping approach for fear of ground fire. We landed on a short steel-matted runway, its length maybe a quarter of what would be normal---- a necessity due to the shortage of real estate and the desire to make less of a target for the NVA (North Vietnam Army), our enemy.

The NVA was the regular Army of North Vietnam. I was told that they were as well-trained and equipped as our troops and had the built-in advantage of knowing the area a hell of a lot better than we did.

I remember getting off the plane and the wind blowing hard and the dust stirring. Everywhere you looked were these ugly green tents with enough sandbags around to stop the Mississippi from overflowing after a month of rain. And the smell, it most definitely was unique, if not unmistakably the stench of war. The makeshift camp was out in the middle of nowhere...no civilians, no high-ranking officers...and if the French used this base in the 1950's, it showed just cause for them to get the hell out of Vietnam. Besides the tents and sandbags, there was one outdoor theater, some portable latrines, a

few makeshift showers, a temporary PX, some dirt roads, a few bunkers, and that was about it. Unless you wanted to count the biggest fucking scorpions you ever laid your eyes on!

When I arrived, there were very few Marines in camp, most were out in the field. I was assigned to one of the green tents which was actually big enough for about a dozen soldiers. There were two cots in mine, one occupied by a wounded Marine.

As I unpacked my gear, the wounded Marine and I talked. He explained that he was confined to the camp for a month. His platoon had been overrun by the NVA and he had been seriously shot in the arm. An enemy soldier, thinking he was dead, was dragging him across the field by a strap when it broke. Rather than returning for him, the NVA soldier left him lying in the field. The Marine played dead until all the NVA had departed the area.

He explained to me that the “2/9” (Second Battalion, Ninth Marines) was at about half strength and that at least 50 percent had been wounded at one time or another. And he schooled me on not only what to do when I was out in the field, but just as important, what not to do.

“When you’re walking in columns,” he explained, “make sure you leave enough room between you and guy in front of you. That way, if he steps on a mine or a booby trap, you will at least have a chance to avoid the shrapnel.”

He stressed that the most important things I needed to remember were to follow orders, to keep my eyes open, to not take any situation for granted, and to be sure that I always had my rifle ready to fire.

It was nothing that hadn’t been preached to us over and over again at Camp Pendleton, but coming from a soldier while actually on Vietnam soil, it had just a bit more meaning. And he cautioned me to ignore anything that I heard at night coming from the North Vietnamese. They would frequently talk and try to intimidate the U.S. troops. While in Dong Hoi, however, my main concern would be rocket fire. I also was told that “2/9” rarely stayed out in the field the normal 3-day stint. Two weeks was more the standard.

As night approached that first day, the skies were unobscured, filled with thousands of glistening stars. It was extremely calm, nothing like when I got off the plane, not even a hint of a breeze. I sat on a stack of sandbags and wrote my parents a short letter. I didn’t want anyone back home to worry about me, so I down-played what area in Vietnam I was in. Basically I just wrote a lot of words and didn’t say too much about anything.

## DAY TWO...

Early the next morning, when it was barely light and the dew lay languidly on the sandbags, all the new troops, about 16 of us, were gathered in a an old warehouse where we were issued our M-16 rifles, grenades, ammunition and other gear that we would need for the field. One thing that was not lost on any of us was how hard it was to find a decent helmet. Most of them were filled with multiple bullet holes.

From the warehouse, they took us to an open field where we test-fired our rifles to be sure they functioned correctly. Then we returned to the camp to get the rest of our gear and were told to meet in one hour. We were going to the field.

We were loaded into two trucks; I was late getting there and got in the back of the second one. When we reached our unit, which was involved in maneuvers near the DMZ, the truck I was in stopped to drop a few of us off while the first truck continued on. It wasn't a minute later that we heard a loud explosion. The first truck had hit a land mine. It was blown in half and was on fire. I wasn't sure if any of the new troops were dead, but some were in pretty bad shape. Within minutes a couple of platoons secured the area for the corpsmen and the evacuation of the Marines.

At the time, I never thought about "what if I hadn't been late and had gotten in that first truck." My attitude through life was that nothing could happen to me and never included "what ifs." But I sure felt sorry for those new troops. What rotten luck.

Once the evacuation was complete, I was introduced to my squad. A normal squad consisted of 14 Marines. Mine had eight, and that was the reality of what was happening to the "2/9." They were getting beat up pretty bad.

There were six blacks and two whites (including me) in my undermanned squad. The squad leader was black, about 22 years old, about 6 feet, 200 pounds, and had no teeth. Even though he was just a private, he had been in-country some 9 months and knew his way around. (I did question the fact he was still a private, but what did I know.)

In any event, private or not, he instilled tremendous confidence in my mind and explained to me that his job was to keep his squad alive.

I wasn't yet situated in my new surroundings when our squad was instructed to go on patrol to look for some missing Marines. One of the "2/9" squads had been ambushed and overrun by the NVA, and we were to search for survivors.

We had combed an area of dense, miserable brush for about 2 hours when we heard the news. Three Marines had been found in the middle of a clearing, hanging



from a half-rotten tree with their hands tied above them. Their bodies had been mutilated, their penises cut off and stuck into their mouths.

I couldn't imagine that anyone could do something like that to another human being. It upset even the most hardened veterans who had seen any number of gruesome sights during their tour.

DAY THREE...

The next day, our company moved closer to the DMZ. As we were walking in columns through the bush, I remembered what the Marine had told me about keeping distance between me and the guy in front of me. Well, I kind of over exaggerated the distance, because when I came around a bend in the road, I couldn't see the Marine in front of me.

Normally, it wouldn't have been any big deal, I could just speed up a little. But in this case, I came to fork in the road and didn't have the slightest idea if my company had to the right or left. And worse yet, there were about 50 Marines behind me, and if I chose to wrong direction, we would all be cut off from the rest of the company.

I took a chance, chose to go to the right, and started double-timing it down the road. I was never so relieved in my life when I finally saw the backside of the Marine in front of me. From that time on I made sure that I kept a Marine within eyesight at all times. I figured I'd just take my chances with the shrapnel.

That night, we set up a perimeter somewhere near the DMZ. I hadn't slightest idea where in the hell we were. But it did give me time to think about what was happening, focus on the reality of being in Vietnam and what was actually taking place. I had the utmost confidence in my fellow Marines and the leadership we had in the field. Combine that with my bulletproof outlook, and it equaled invincibility.

We hadn't been settled in long before I got my first dose of the monsoon rains. It poured so hard I could have stayed drier standing under Niagara Falls. I was wearing a lightweight poncho that directed the heavy rain toward the flooded ground below. Unfortunately, the water drained right into a ditch...a ditch I had to sit in, or, you might say, wade in, all night long.

We knew the NVA were close to our perimeter, but because of the blinding rain, you couldn't see 3 feet in front of you. Nobody got much sleep, and I was still awake when it came time for me to stand my first watch.

We had sent out "listening posts" which consisted of two-man teams that would set up just outside the perimeter. They took their rifles, a radio, illumination grenades, and star cluster with them. If they detected any NVA movement, they would set off

either a grenade or a cluster. One color would warn those on watch that the enemy was in the immediate area. Another color would signal that the listening post was being overrun.

I had a sense of tremendous responsibility being on watch. But because of the blinding rain, I had the uneasy feeling that all those NVA's would be on top of us before I could warn my sleeping squad members. Luckily, it turned out to be a quiet night.

DAY FOUR...

By morning, the rain had stopped, but all my gear was soaked. We barely had time to eat some C rations for breakfast before we had to pack up and head out to sweep an area that Intelligence told us was heavily occupied by NVA.

My squad was one of two that dug in while the others performed this sweep. We were set up in a wooded area which surrounded a clearing. (Trees not of great height, but thick...giving good reasons for the term "bush" when out in the field.) The other squads would circle around and push anything and everything that moved toward us. Anything that came our way, we were to fire at.

As I sat there waiting, all I could picture was hundreds of NVA running from the bush into the clearing. But after waiting for what seemed forever, the sweep came up empty.

Later that afternoon, the temperature rose to at least 100. We were moving through heavy brush. We had to zigzag our way through rocks and gullies, and the terrain took its toll on everybody. It took us about 3 hours to move just 500 yards, and everybody ran out of water, including me. Any number of Marines suffered severe heatstroke, and it got so bad at one point that some had to be airlifted out.

Physically, I was just as exhausted as the others, but mentally, I knew I could go on. I just kept telling myself to put one foot in front of the other until we reached our destination, wherever that was.

Eventually, we reached a fast-moving stream, and as I approached it, all I could think about was how my mouth felt. It was like it was filled with a box of cotton balls. I dropped my gear and rifle and threw myself into the stream. I took off my helmet and kept filling it up with water and gulped it down as fast as I could, not even thinking about purifying it with the iodine pills we carried. I should have gotten sick, but after resting for about 15 minutes, I moved on with the company without any ill effects. We hiked for a few more hours through the bush, then set up a perimeter for the night.

John, a short, stocky, black 20-year-old with an attitude (trust me, it was obvious) and I were assigned L.P. (listening post) for that night. It was my first, but

John had been on many. I figured I would just listen to him (attitude and all) and do everything he said.

Being out of the secured perimeter gave me a strange feeling, especially at night. (Between the pitch-black darkness and the thick brush, I was lucky to see the back of my hand, let alone the enemy approaching.) I didn't really mind the waiting and watching, but the idea of setting off one of those flares to signal the perimeter that we were being overrun...well, that didn't particularly excite me. Nothing of importance happened that night, and after 4 hours, John and I were relieved by two others. I was tired and worn-out and had little trouble getting some desperately needed sleep.

DAY FIVE...

The next day, we were out on a search-and-destroy mission. I was told that the closer to the DMZ we got, the more NVA we were going to encounter.

Our squad was assigned to securing a road, while the remainder of the company started a sweep in a different direction. Our squad leader positioned Robert, the other white Marine in our square, and me about 50 yards in front of the others. We set up two Claymore mines and placed ourselves so that we could see anything that came down the road (actually, more of a path, just enough room for a column of NVA to march down single file). We were instructed to open fire on anything that moved...and the squad leader stressed ANYTHING.

As we were sitting there by ourselves, Robert started up a conversation. He seemed on edge, even a little paranoid. At first glance Robert was not the type that anyone would pick from our square to be in a pinch with. He was a little on the frail side and certainly did not exude a lot of confidence. I felt very uncomfortable talking in this situation. It seemed as if we should be giving our undivided attention to the road. But, on the other hand, Robert had been in-country some three months, and even though he seemed to be lacking in certain areas, I figured he should at least know when it was all right to be talking.

He told me that he was having a difficult time because he felt the black Marines in our square were prejudiced against him. While I knew prejudices existed, I hadn't seen any in the squad during my first few days there. One thing I had noticed, though, was that Robert was constantly put on point, probably the most dangerous position during a maneuver, and there wasn't very much interaction between him and the others.

About a half hour into our watch, we thought we heard some movement, and our conversation ceased immediately. Then the movement was unmistakable. I set off both Claymore mines, then we emptied the clips of our M-16s before falling back to where the

rest of our squad was dug in. Once together, all eight of us moved up the road with as much firepower as we could muster.

All of this lasted about 3 minutes, and as we swept back through the area, we found a lot of holes in the tress and branches, but no NVA.

That night we were assigned as backup to another squad that went out on a night ambush. It turned out to be one of my least favorite assignments.

We had to listen on a two-way radio for part of the night in case the ambush squad encountered more than it could handle. It would have rather been involved in the actual ambush than sit anxiously around a radio, not knowing what...if anything, was going to happen. As we were waiting in anticipation... “We hear them coming down the road,” a voice over the radio exclaimed! “We see them, there’s six, seven, eight of them,” the same voice whispered.

All of a sudden, we heard the popping of M-16’s. “There they are,” the voice called out. Pop, pop, pop! “Over there.” Pop, pop, pop. Then a few seconds of silent, “All clear,” came across the radio, and the ambush was over. It didn’t take long.

The rest of the night was pretty quiet, except for a blowup later that evening... within our own squad. Robert was on his watch and supposedly fell asleep. I never knew if he did or not, I just knew that we were all awakened by John’s accusations.

Robert was adamant that he was awake the entire time. Our square leader broke up the argument, telling them he didn’t want to hear another word. If they wanted to fight, he instructed them to go outside the perimeter and “fight the fucking NVA.”

DAY SIX...

When dawn came, we set out to move north through the bush. When we came upon a clearing, John, Robert and I were told to secure the area while the others searched an isolated trail.

We couldn’t have been there more than a couple of minutes when John and Robert got into it again. They got so loud I expected to hear the sounds of a banshee...it would only have been fitting. Hell, the NVA in Hanoi could have heard them, let alone the few thousand around us.

I’d had enough. I grabbed both of them and in the strongest words I could think of told them I wasn’t going to get killed because they couldn’t get along. A “Shut your fucking mouths,” quieted them down as they backed off, and neither said another word. I was sure that it wasn’t over, however.

It was our turn to be on ambush watch, and the monsoons hit us again that night.

When we left the perimeter, the weather was so miserable that our squad leader decided to abandon the maneuver. Instead he took us to an area where we found an abandoned, half-destroyed church. Even though his orders were very clear, the thought of staying dry for that one night, didn't meet with much resistance from the rest of it.

I remember when we first got into the church, we all took our helmets and held them outside the broken window frames, trying to collect some rainwater to drink. It tasted awfully good, and enabled us to save the water in our canteens. More often than not, we never knew if or when we would come across any drinkable water.

John was instructed to take the first watch, Robert the second. When Robert came to relieve John, we were all awakened again by a vociferous argument. John wasn't comfortable with the situation and took the opportunity to convince the squad leader that Robert had fallen asleep before and if he did it again, we all could be killed.

When the squad leader sided with John, Robert said in frustration, "Fine, you guys don't trust me, I'll sleep outside," and picked up his gear and went out into the rain.

I felt sorry for Robert. He didn't have any support within our squad and still had to cope with the stress of the war itself. I waited a few minutes, picked up my M-16 and went out to keep him company.

The rain had stopped. I found him sitting on a rock about 30 yards from the church. He said he'd be fine, that he just needed some time away from John. Then he reminded me that there could be NVA in the area and this time we should cool the chitchat.

I wasn't sleepy, so I decided to stay with him. About 15 minutes later we heard some noises from off in the distance. We signaled each other...I went one direction, Robert the other.

I headed up a little mound, about 20 yards from where we had been sitting. I waited and listened, heard more noises, then moved down the mound. I continued to move slowly and cautiously to the edge of the small clearing among the thick brush.

Then directly in front of me, about 50 feet away, I saw two NVA soldiers kneeling down and raising their rifles toward the area where Robert was supposed to be searching.

I had my finger on the trigger, ready to fire...but I hesitated. I was in somewhat of a daze...numb. Generally, in firefights, you are firing the direction of where you suspect the enemy is. For the first time, I actually could see the individual soldiers, and it completely caught me off guard.

My hesitation was only that, as I realized immediately they saw me. Unfortunately, it allowed them just enough time to dive for cover. It all seemed to be happening in slow motion...from the time they saw me...their diving for cover...and as I started pulling the trigger, unloading the entire clip. Within a few seconds, I figured they were either dead or halfway back to Hanoi, because there was no return fire. Whichever...at that particular moment, I really didn't care...I just wanted to take a second, gather my wits about me and reload.

As I was replacing my clip, Robert came running up to me, grabbed my arm and pulled me to the ground. He looked at me briefly and then said, "Let's get the fuck out of here!" We didn't know if there were others around; if there were, we weren't going to try and find them. We hurried back to the church to alert the rest of the squad.

Our squad leader told us to pack up, that we were going back to the perimeter. About halfway back, we stopped to make sure there were no NVA in the immediate area, then the squad leader took Robert and me aside.

"I look out for all of you guys," he told us, "And you have to look out for me," referring to the fact we were supposed to be on an ambush, not sitting in a church high and dry. "As far as anyone else is concerned, none of what just happened ever happened. We set up alongside the road, and the ambush came up empty."

He reiterated that he'd keep taking care of us, but we had to do the same for him. He really didn't have to say so, however. It was all very clear to me and I had no problem with it.

When we arrived at the perimeter, my adrenaline was still flowing, and I couldn't fall asleep. All I could think about were those two NVA soldiers I had encountered earlier.

DAY SEVEN...

We went out on another search-and-destroy mission. After hiking through the bush, hour after hour, without any contact with the NVA, we set up our perimeter. As night set in I sat around with some of the other Marines and talked about the war. Some talked about their personal problems back home.

I was shocked when the conversation got around to the mail. I couldn't believe what some of the Marines wrote home, or what their loved ones wrote back. Personally, I felt the less I wrote about the war to the ones who loved and worried about me, the better. I guess it just made some feel better to not keep it inside.

There was one letter in particular a Marine had received from his girlfriend. She wrote that she had met another guy and had an affair. She said that she was feeling

guilty and wanted to be honest with him. How insensitive...or thoughtless...or even stupid, was she?

There is a time for honesty and there is even a time to lie...or a time for silence.

Here's a guy, clear across the world, sleeping mud, hiking through almost impenetrable brush...one day in 100 degree weather, the next in blinding rain, facing death 24 hours a day. The one and only positive thing he had, day in and day out, was thinking about her waiting for him back home. What in the hell did she possibly think would be going through his mind after reading a letter like that?

We felt sorry for the guy and tried to explain to him that he was better off without her. Unfortunately, I'm sure none of what we said got through to him..."time" would be his better ally now.

Then there was another letter a guy got from his girlfriend. Instead of signing it, "Love forever," she puts "Fucks forever." Now that was a letter. And, it helped to lighten up the mood after the Dear John.

We all talked about the most simple things back home. Like cruising Main Street on a Friday night, football games, picking up girls, things we used to take so much for granted. Now they were so important...and so missed.

Later, I went off by myself and sat under the stars. It was so clear. I could see for miles, and the sky reminded me of the "Big Sky" in Montana. Off in the distance I could see the flashes of the big guns from battleships bombarding the DMZ. Each faraway flash brought another dose of reality. Then for the first time I really started to philosophize about war.

How hard must it be for parents to watch their son or daughter go off to war? What gives them the strength to accept it? And, for the sons and daughters who are actually doing the fighting, where does their strength come from?

I'm sure there are a myriad of answers. To me, the simplest was somebody has to do it. There was a job to be done, and you have no choice. You do it.

Then I remembered what our squad leader had told us upon our return. Tomorrow we would be going further up into the DMZ than "2/9" had ever gone. It was going to be a massive search-and-destroy mission, and we would be the lead squad for the company.

DAY EIGHT...

As usual, Robert was on point, and I was on the left flank. As we moved along, I spotted movement in the distance and immediately dropped to the ground. The rest of

the squad followed suit. Within a couple of minutes, another squad checked our flank and confirmed that my vivid imagination was far better than my eyesight.

When we resumed our trek towards DMZ, we moved through hills that had been heavily bombed days earlier. There were piles of freshly dug dirt, indicating that the NVA had been there hours or minutes before. It was obvious we were entering more hostile territory, but we still had met with no resistance.

Once, when we had stopped to rest, a platoon of six or seven tanks rolled up. I remember it vividly because I was so envious. These Marines didn't have to walk. They rode. They carried their gear on the tank, not on their backs. As we sat there, dead tired from hiking through rough terrain, they sat on the top of their vehicles, broke out huge containers of water, and leaned back as if they didn't have a worry in the world.

But on the other hand, I knew that I wouldn't want to be in one those tin cans if it ever ran over a mine. The NVA had mines with a pressure plate and when a tank hit one, the mines would explode straight upwards through the belly of the tank, sending shrapnel everywhere. The tank, including its occupants, would be blown to hell. No thanks.

As we pushed on through an area we were certain was NVA infested, all of our searches continued to come up empty. Because of the likely danger, when we set our perimeter that night, we didn't send out any ambush squads. It was my night for L.P., however, and I was a little more concerned this time. My concern proved unwarranted, as everything was quiet again.

DAY NINE...

Following that uneventful night, we packed up and continued our mission deep into the DMZ. Our column moved slowly and cautiously up steep hills and through areas where it seemed as though the trees were watching our every move.

When we reached a fork in the road, Robert and I were instructed to search a trail that angled off while the others continued on the main road.

We searched the trail to no avail, then headed back to our squad. Once we hit the main road, we heard shots and Marines yelling, "Alpha squad under fire"... "Alpha squad under fire." It was our squad!!!!

As we ran up the road, we could see the others on the ground and off to the side. Robert stopped and took over. I kept going. With every step I took, the firing of rifles became louder and more rapid, duplicating each and every beat of my heart. By the time I reached my squad, they were already advancing toward the clearing they were being attacked from. Suddenly, the firing stopped.



We proceeded into the clearing. When we got about halfway through it, all hell broke loose. The NVA had set up an ambush, and they opened up with .30-caliber machine guns. As I was dropped to the ground for cover, I started to return fire. Then a round from the NVA machine gun pierced my helmet, drove into my skull through part of my brain and out again. My first thought was that someone had hit me over the head with a sledgehammer. Then I felt surprised that something actually happened to me. All this went through my mind in a fraction of a second.

I was still conscious, but everything went completely blank. During that split second, there was sort of an anxiety feeling and a distinctive ringing sound. I thought to myself that this must be how you die.

The ringing stopped and there was complete silence, then a small cloudy point of light appeared. I still could not see anything except the light. As it grew stronger, it seemed to draw me up towards it. Then I saw some figures and at that time the anxiety went away. A peacefulness and calm came over me.

The figures were not recognizable. They had no real shape or form, no definite color, but they made me feel at ease. Safe. Then, from far above the figures, I heard a voice. It was like no sound I had ever heard before.

“When you go back, there is one thing you people always forget, and that one thing is that it is ‘okay’.” Then the unusual but forceful voice repeated, “When you go back, there is one thing you people always forget, and that one thing is that it is ‘okay’.” And just like that, the light disappeared, replaced by some kind of circular disk. It was black and white and went around and around, much like something a hypnotist would use. I concentrated on the swirling motion, and within a few seconds my vision started to return.

The first thing I saw was a flash go through a black Marine’s arm. A bullet had penetrated his limb like a hot knife cutting through butter. Blood squirted out everywhere, and the Marine screamed in pain. Luckily, I had fallen behind a mound of dirt, and the Marine was able to crawl over to where we both had some protection from the heavy barrage of fire.

There was blood everywhere. Blood from the Marine’s arm...what was left of it; blood from my head. I put my left hand up to my wounded head and felt a big gaping hole. And for the first time, I realized that with the exception of that arm, I was completely paralyzed.

There was still a lot of firing going on, explosions from grenades and yelling. Lots of yelling. “Corpsman, I’ve been hit. Corpsman.” As I lay there, amidst the confusion, I could see two U.S. Marine jets flying over us.

I knew there was nothing they could do. The NVA were right on top of us. But it was just a good feeling to see them there.

When a corpsman crawled over to us, he bandaged the part of the arm that was still left on the other Marine, then he wrapped my head with mounds of gauze. I asked him just how bad my wound was, "Tell me the truth," I beseeched. He would only tell me to stay calm and that they were going to get us out of there as quickly as they could.

Just then, a grenade exploded about 10 feet from us. Dirt sprayed everywhere, and I looked up at the corpsman. Even though we had some cover, I wondered whether he would be able to stay with us. We were the only three still alive in the clearing. Everyone else was dead or had retreated to the edge of the field. It was evident, however, he wasn't about to leave us...no matter how long we were pinned down.

Eventually, a couple of squads had managed to circle around the NVA. They came in from behind and wiped out the ambush party. Minutes later, the corpsman and some other Marines put me and the other wounded or dead on stretchers and moved us to an area where we could be evacuated by helicopter.

I only got a brief moment to thank the corpsman. He showed a lot of courage that day. Probably no more than many of the Marines, but it just seemed that the corpsmen were always exposing themselves to the dangers of war...putting themselves at risk when they didn't have to. We all had a job to do, but they just seemed to go that extra step.

As I was lying there waiting to be put on a helicopter, a wave of anger came over me. I was made that I got shot, mad that I was paralyzed, and as they were lining up the body bags, I was made that I wasn't able to prevent the killing. All my life I had felt I was invincible...I couldn't get hurt. Now, I'm laying there, helpless. I was in total disbelief.

The wounded were loaded onto the helicopter first...then the body bags.

The flight back to Dong Ho seemed to take forever. There was a chorus of moaning and groaning as a lot of Marines were in tremendous pain. As I lay there, I couldn't help but think about the injury to my head and if I were going to be paralyzed for the rest of my life. And for whatever reason, I did not remember the voice or the unrecognizable figures.

Once on the ground at Dong Hoi, the wounded were rushed to the hospital tent. I was examined, then scheduled to be flown immediately to Da Nang, where doctors could operate on my head wound.

We were transported in a small cargo plane and arrived late at night. When I was unloaded, my stretcher was quickly strapped onto the outside rail of a two-man helicopter, and we flew to the hospital. Once there, I was put on a gurney and wheeled into a waiting area with about eight other Marines.

Lying there, I overheard two attendants deciding whom to move where. "What about this guy," one asked, referring to me.

"He's just a vegetable," the other answered. "Don't worry about him, we'll get to him later."

I don't think I got mad at the attendant who referred to me as a vegetable, but the term got me to thinking more seriously about my condition and future. The concept of helplessness was unthinkable to me...and yet here I was, thinking about it. And the more I thought about it, the angrier I got. And the angrier I got, the more I could feel myself turning from the eternal optimist I had been my entire life toward the enemy... pessimism. This was very difficult for me to deal with. In fact, I realized that I didn't know how to deal with it, and by the time they finally took me into the operating room I had become more and more insecure.

DAY TEN...

The surgeons removed bone fragments from my brain, cleaned out the wound and sewed my scalp back together. When I awoke, I found myself in a ward with about 40 other soldiers. The guy next to me had both legs blown away. Other soldiers had big gaping shrapnel or gunshot wounds; some had head wounds much worse than mine. To be sure, there was a lot of pain and a lot of uncertainty.

One of the surgeons who operated on me told me they had done everything they could, and that I would be returned to the States, where a plate would be placed in my head to protect my brain. He candidly answered all my questions concerning my paralysis.

He explained that since I got shot on the left side of the brain, it should only affect my right side. How much movement I would get back, if any, he wasn't sure; only time would tell. After he left, a nurse who was attending to me told me I was lucky because this particular doctor was one of the foremost neurosurgeons in the world. He was from France and had volunteered his services for 2 weeks.

DAY ELEVEN...

After a night's rest, I woke up the next morning and found that as the day progressed, I could move both limbs on my left side. But, just as the doctor had warned

me, I had absolutely no movement on my right side. It was hard to accept lying there, looking at the fingers on my right hand and not being able to move them...not even one.

About three nights into my stay, we experienced a rocket attack. I had to grab the rail of my bed and hold on as tight as I could with my left arm. I fell to the floor but managed to pull myself under the bed. When the attack was over, I had to wait for someone to come by, pick me up, and put me back into bed.

After a horrid week in Da Nang, about 20 others and I were loaded onto another cargo plane for our long journey home. Out stretchers were stacked up in rows of three, like triple bunk beds. Remembering back to my flight to Vietnam, it seemed strange. We were such a carefree bunch of Marines on the TWA flight. I had the use of all my limbs, tremendous self-confidence, and some very attractive stewardesses waiting on me.

Now, on the way back, I was in a large hollow cargo plane, where nobody was mobile, let alone carefree. I had no use of half my limbs and no confidence in myself whatsoever. And we had nurses instead of stewardesses. (It was one hell of a football game!!!)

The flight took more than 24 hours, and even though I couldn't wait until it was over, I was not anxious to see anyone back home. Strapped to a stretcher, there was virtually nothing to do except think. And my thoughts drifted from the fact that I actually was not invincible, to the seriousness of my injury, to simpler things like playing football....like walking. (Now instead of questions...I was looking for answers.)

Finally, the plane landed in Oakland, California. I was supposed to stay in the hospital there for a couple of days, then be flown to San Diego and transported to the Balboa Naval Hospital.

It was quickly wheeled into a room that was big enough for two beds and not much more. I had just gotten settled when a Marine Corps general edged his way into my tight quarters. He was there to award me a Purple Heart. As I looked at him, I wanted to tell him that I wasn't supposed to receive one of those. I was never supposed to have been shot in the first place.

After the general left, I had some surprise visitors. My cousin Dennis and his parents, who lived in the area, had called the Marines Liaison Office and found out when I would be arriving and where I would be taken. Naturally the first thing they wanted to know was how I was doing, then they explained the chain of events that led up to my parents being notified.

My mom had been home doing the dishes. As she looked out the kitchen window, she noticed a Marine in dress blues getting out of a government car. As she observed him walking slowly up the walkway to our house, her knees became weak and nearly buckled.

As she nervously opened the front door, the look on the Marine's face told most of the story. He explained to her that I had been shot in the head during a firefight near the DMZ, that I was still alive, but he had no further information.

My dad was in an important meeting at work when he was interrupted by his secretary. After she gave him the message, he returned to the meeting and simply explained that his son had been wounded in Vietnam and that he needed to go home.

Almost a week went by before they received any more information about my condition. During that time my parents tried calling everyone, including a state senator. To say the least, it was a pretty rough week for them.

During my cousin's visit, a nurse brought me a phone so that I could call home. When mom answered, the sound of our voices touched all our emotions. And when dad came to the phone, I could hear a sigh of relief in his voice. All in all, it was a pretty emotional conversation. I explained my paralysis, told them I was all right, though, and that I would be home soon. What I didn't tell them, however, was that I was having a hard time accepting the fact I was paralyzed...inside, I had changed.

After talking with my visitors a little longer, we said our good-byes and I tried to get some sleep.

## Chapter 13

The next day, I was flown to San Diego and transported to a neurosurgical ward at the Balboa Naval Hospital.

Each side of the ward was lined with plain steel-framed beds. There must have been 60 of them, and at least 90 percent were occupied by Marine or Navy servicemen with severe head injuries. The majority of the men had been injured in Vietnam, but others were hurt locally or were dependents of military personnel stationed in San Diego.

As I lay in bed, I couldn't visualize how I was going to be able to see my family and friends in my present condition. Even worse, I wondered how I would ever be able to face Trish or Linda. When it came right down to it, I didn't want to see anyone, I just wanted to be by myself. (By myself, with 60 fucking other pathetic patients!!!!)

I had a virtual cornucopia of new roommates. One Marine, a two-tour veteran of Vietnam, had a portion of his head blown away; a sergeant had a suspected brain tumor. There was a Navy crewman who had fallen through an open hatch and split his head wide open; a 16-year-old son of a Navy captain who had his head crushed in a car accident and was paralyzed from the neck down. A Marine in the bed next to me had been following too closely while on patrol in Vietnam when the soldier in front of him activated a land mine. Shrapnel had penetrated the base of his brain and severed the lower part of his spine, paralyzing him from the waist down. The other Marine had been killed. I wondered who was luckier.

Some of the patients were ambulatory, some had to use a wheelchair and others were totally bedridden.

On my second day at Balboa my parents and grandparents, sister and brother and their spouses, all came to visit. I tried to be as positive as I could and convince them that I would be all right, that I just needed some time. Hopefully, I was convincing because, truthfully, I couldn't wait until they left. I still did not want to see anyone.

I'm sure that my language was not the most appropriate for a family gathering. The word "fuck" came up way too often. But they had a lot of patience with me and showed a hell of a lot more confidence in me than I did in myself. They left me with the feeling that they were just glad to see me alive and that the paralysis didn't matter. Unfortunately, it mattered to me...no, it didn't matter to me...it devastated me!

It devastated me, because at one time there was a common thread between the underdog who eventually was victorious and me...at least in my mind there was.

Throughout history people overcame the greatest of odds. Just as Clay ended up beating Liston and David defeated Goliath, I wanted to conquer the unconquerable.

But now, all my dreams, all my confidence, all the things I had always lived by...I was convinced were gone.

I wanted to be the one to protect the Jerry Grady's of the world, to stop the neighborhood bully, protect the girl next door...and least of all, when it came to war, rise to the occasion and be depended upon, not only to save lives, but to instill confidence in people to triumph in battle...no matter what the odds.

Not only did I fail in the latter, but I felt that I would never be in the position to help anyone, ever again.

I wanted so much to be in the fight, but I wasn't able. I had so many doubts.

It was like Jerry Grady got stabbed in the foot and never played at the park again. My sister's classmates beat up all the helpless kids in the school; Mike Boone to this day challenged people to hit him in the mouth. My friend's sister was buried alive. Alice had no California heroes; girls in the Midwest were intimidated and beaten by their boyfriends at will. People who didn't believe in fighting either had to give up their principles or suffer the consequences; overweight Mexican kids never moved fast enough and would pay dearly. I just lay there thinking...who would slay the dragons now?

The next day, I got phone calls from a bevy of friends----Bernie, Joe and Dennis to name a few. I told them all the same thing, that I was fine and that I preferred to wait and see them when I got home versus their coming to the hospital.

Late in the afternoon a doctor came by to see me. He told me he wanted to wait at least a couple of months before putting the synthetic plate in my head. I asked about my paralysis, and he answered with the same line the doctor in Vietnam had used. He was confident I would get some movement back, but he couldn't speculate how much or when.

Later that week I started physical therapy. My therapist was a young attractive woman who seemed very competent, very positive. Anyone with an ounce of sense would have worked with her. The problem was, at that time, I had no sense. Rather, I was noncooperative and very sarcastic and during the first couple of weeks I made no progress.

My sarcasm came to a head one day when she instructed me to try an exercise and I told her, "What the fuck for?"

Extremely agitated, she told me, “You know, I don’t appreciate that kind of language, and if you don’t change your attitude, you’re going to change therapists.”

“I really don’t give a fuck,” I responded with my recently self-taught charm.

She turned in disgust and started to walk away, then stopped abruptly. “On second thought, I wouldn’t give you to any of my associates. They’re too good to do that to. When you want to behave yourself, you let me know. Until then, when you come down to the therapy room, you can just lie here by yourself.”

The next couple of weeks weren’t much better. I wasn’t getting along with anyone; in particular, the Marine sergeant with the brain tumor.

He was forever trying to start a conversation with me. I wasn’t interested and mostly ignored him. He was 30 years old yet acted very immature. I often heard the nurses talking about his condition. When I say a brain tumor, that’s not exactly the truth. He suffered from chronic headaches, and doctors “suspected” he had a brain tumor.

In those days, the only way to truly find out was through exploratory surgery. The nurses said that surgeons had cut into his skull twice before but could not find a tumor. With each surgery his mental capacity decreased, and the nurses feared if the surgeries continued, he would be reduced to have the mentality of an adolescent. In retrospect, I should have shown him more patience. At that time, however, I didn’t have patience for anyone.

The Marine next to me, John (the one following the other Marine too closely), was another one always trying to start up a conversation. He’d want to know how I got hurt, where I was from, what I thought about the way...things in general. I really didn’t want to be his friend, or for that matter, even talk to him. Still, he volunteered what had happened to him and constantly updated me on everyone else as well. When it got to the point where he just would not stop babbling, I finally had to tell him I wasn’t interested in any more talk and to “Just leave me the fuck alone!” That did the trick. I imagined that I had offended him...maybe even hurt his feelings. But, to put it plain and simple...I really didn’t give a damn.

The nurses weren’t much better. All their small talk drove me up the wall. Especially when one would come up to me and ask, “How are we feeling today?” One time I answered, “We aren’t feeling very fucking good!” The nurse quickly reminded me that she outranked me and I better watch my filthy mouth.

I was probably a little envious of the 16-year-old son of the Navy captain. He must have been pretty popular in high school, because one good-looking girl after



another paraded into the hospital to visit him. Unfortunately, being paralyzed from the neck down was not an enviable position to be in.

I wasn't being visited by beautiful young girls, but I was receiving quite a bit of mail. Much of it was from people I didn't even know. The local papers around Arcadia had run articles that I had been wounded in Vietnam and transferred to Balboa Naval Hospital. Just as I wasn't in much of a mood to talk with anyone, I didn't choose to answer my mail. (It's amazing how quickly cards and letters stop coming if you don't answer them.)

The person I was most envious of, however, was the Marine who served two tours of duty in Vietnam (hell, I couldn't even last a month). I was no more friendly to him than anyone else, but his bed was near mine and I couldn't help overhearing him talk about his experiences in Vietnam. Thank goodness he was going to be discharged in a couple of weeks and I wouldn't have to listen to any more of his stories.

I was just as upset in not completing my tour as in anything else. The shock of not being invincible was at least diminishing somewhat. But I had so much guilt, and it just seemed to be building each and every day.

I'd continue to listen to the Marine's stories of his two tours and all the combat situations he was in and only wished that I could still be there.

It was strange. I didn't dream of Vietnam or for that matter even think about when I was there. I listened and lived it through other Marines. My dreams were always about when I was younger and even more specifically the times my family spent the entire summer at Yosemite National Park.

From the time I was 2 years old until I was 12, dad would take his 2-week vacation at the beginning of the summer, and mom would take the entire summer off.

Then, after the first 2 weeks, dad would go back to the police department and work during the week and return to the park on weekends. We ended up camping approximately 3 months every summer at Yosemite my entire life. It was my domain. (Tall redwoods, waterfalls, rivers flowing swiftly through the valley...bears, deer wandering in the wild and a lot more.)

Normally, you would think thoughts and dreams about something so good in one's life would be a positive thing, especially when other options could be so much more intense and extreme...like Vietnam.

But for me, every time I would dream or my mind would drift to the past----to the years camping at Yosemite----I would get more and more depressed and discouraged.

One of my dreams was about the day my cousin Dennis and I were on a rubber mattress in the middle of the deepest part of a river that ran through Yosemite. We were about 9 years old and had to be very careful, because Dennis couldn't swim. Then, unexpectedly, the mattress shot out from underneath us and headed down the river, leaving us floundering.

Dennis was frantic. He was clawing and kicking me...he was drowning. I remember being underwater and trying to hold Dennis up as he was kicking and pushing at me. His continuous thrashing was starting to cause me problems. Besides being belted every few seconds, I was having a hard time getting to the surface to gasp for air.

I knew help would come. I just needed to keep him afloat. He, unintentionally, of course, was trying to do everything he could to drown me. But I knew one thing and one thing only...I wasn't leaving him.

Dennis's dad had been swimming up the river a way, and when he finally noticed what was happening, he swam to us. He eventually pulled Dennis to safety. I, on the other hand, barely made it back to shore. I had never been so exhausted in all my life.

When I woke up from my dream, I looked at my right arm and leg and tried to picture what in the hell could I do now, given those same circumstances.

My dreams had become living nightmares. Whenever I would either dream or think about something that had been good in my life, it would turn me more and more bitter.

Anyway, physically and mentally I wasn't improving and, as each day passed, the less social I became. As I lay in bed, I was having all sorts of mixed emotions and thought about things that only made matters worse.

I would daydream back to Yosemite again. Back to a 3-year period in which each summer I would look forward to seeing two people the most. One was Vicky Quartini, the other was Julie Baker. Vicky was actually the first girl I ever asked out on a real date. Julie was the second. (We were all about 10 years old.) They were completely opposite and, strangely enough, I acted completely different around each of them. With Vicky, I always minded my P's and Q's. She was a petite, dark-complected Italian girl from San Francisco, with long jet black hair. She also was very religious; in fact, the first present I ever gave her was a crucifix. On our first date we went to Camp Curry (this was the main camp in the valley; it had restaurants, shops, grocery stores and a ten-piece band that played every night). We danced under the stars until late at night...it was pretty romantic.

I never tried to impress Vicky; I just concentrated on acting properly. Julie, however, (short, blonde hair, shorter and lighter-skinned than Vicky) was kind of a tomboy, and all I did was try to impress her. I would dive off high bridges, scurry up sheer cliffs and climb to the top of the tallest redwoods. I would even chase bears out of the campsites, just to show her nothing scared me.

In return, she would attempt to match my feats, although some of the time she was a little timid or just a lot smarter than me.

Quite often we would leave our camp in the middle of the night and meet down by the river. We would skip rocks across water; one, two, three, four, five and at times, many more little splashes would appear as the stone glided across the river. As we took turns the moonlight would follow the tiny, flat rock until the final splash. Then we would sit and listen to the river flowing over the bigger rock and just and talk. It was pretty cool. I mostly talked about how I was going to conquer the world when I grew up...which some would take as being the wide-eyed dreams of an overconfident, cocky, little 10 year old. But not Julie. She understood...it was just me.

I kept thinking more about my first dance with Vicky, about showing off for Julie, and about never being able to do either again. There really wasn't much of anything I could do anymore.

Then my thoughts wandered to Trish and Linda, and at that time without any hesitation, I made a conscious decision not to try to contact either one of them ever again.

## Chapter 14

Well, whether I wanted to or not, the doctors ordered me home for the upcoming weekend.

My parents picked me up early Friday morning, and from that moment until they drove me back Sunday night, I tried to downplay everything.

When we first got home, I must admit, it felt kind of good. But it was hard to see my parents and grandparents and even harder to see some of my friends, including Joe and Bernie. I don't know if it was guilt or shame, but whatever it was, it overshadowed everything else.

Again, I wasn't supposed to get shot, I was to serve my full tour of duty in Vietnam, and I never, ever was to end up a "cripple."

During dinner and the following day, I got updated on all the local gossip. We never talked about the war or what happened. Even Joe and Bernie didn't pry.

Before I left, I told my parents that it would be at least a few weeks before the doctors would let me come home again. In reality though, from that weekend on, it was my choice to make.

Once back at the hospital it was the same old routine, except most had tired of trying to be nice to me, which didn't give me much change to tell people to fuck off anymore.

One day, out of the blue, I received a phone call from Trist. Evidently she had also read about me in one of the local papers. When I heard her voice, I had mixed feelings and actually felt a little afraid.

She told me that within a few days after I had left for Vietnam, she and her ex-husband had gotten into one of their typical arguments and that she had left him for good. When she asked to come visit me in the hospital, I explained to her that I was having a hard time dealing with everything and I'd rather she wait until I felt more comfortable with it. I could hear the disappointment in her voice, but she agreed to wait.

Part of me wished that Trish was with me right at that moment, but I was so confused. I was also thinking that I would probably never see her again anyway. I didn't even mention the paralysis, but it didn't matter. As far as I was concerned, anything between the two of us was over. It was strange, it was over and yet it never really began. I guess we never were meant to be together, even though since the first day we met, I always had her on my mind...always.



## Chapter 15

That next week, they moved a new patient next to me. He had a steel pin inserted into his head and was paralyzed from the neck down. He was in a steel-framed rotating bed, which allowed him to rest without a mattress, eliminating any chance of bedsores. His feet were attached to some kind of weird contraption. Sometimes he would be placed facedown, about 4 feet off the ground, then periodically they would rotate him faceup. He looked very uncomfortable, but I figured being paralyzed from the neck down, it probably didn't matter.

He had one very bad habit, however. He slept during the day, then moaned and groaned all night long. He also muttered indistinguishable words that I never paid any attention to. I'd just throw towels at him in the middle of the night, trying to shut him up. Sometimes, during the day, I would accidentally (on purpose) bump into his bed with my wheelchair just to wake him up. I had no compassion for him at all, and I let him know it. At night, I was constantly telling him to shut the fuck up and do his fucking moaning during the day>

After the fifth night of his stay, I was very restless and having a hard time sleeping. It was about one in the morning and (this time) I was thinking back to Vietnam, tossing and turning in bed and sweating profusely. It was the first time that I had thought about the incidents leading up to and when I got shot. I relived everything.

I saw Robert and myself returning to our squad after searching the trail and hearing the firefight break out. I remembered us running past other Marines towards our squad. Robert stopped; I continued. I again felt the shot in the head like a sledgehammer hitting me. It all came back to me; the feelings while telling myself, "This is how you die," the light, the unrecognizable figures and most of all, the unusual but deliberate voice.

The more I thought about it...my paralysis, the fact I was not invincible, my personal doubts, the uncertainty...it all seemed secondary, now that I remembered the voice...and what it had to say.

Overwhelming would be an understatement. To have such strong doubts and then remember something that takes all those doubts away within a matter of seconds cannot be explained...it can only be experienced.

All of this was interrupted when I heard the mumbling of the guy next to me. And for the first time, I could understand him. He was saying that he didn't want to die... over and over again. And, also for the first time, I felt compassion for him as a

tremendous sense of guilt came over me. Here was a guy, lying paralyzed, lonely and scared about dying. I realized I wanted to try to help him in any way I could.

I took my pillow and threw it to the floor. Then I grabbed the bedpost with my left hand, swung my good leg over the side of the bed and flopped onto the hard cold floor (missing the damn pillow completely). He was facedown, so I slid under him and propped my head up on the pillow, and there we were staring at one another.

I apologized for being such an asshole. He didn't say or even attempt to say anything once I started talking, but I wasn't really expecting any conversation. His speech was limited, and until that moment I hadn't been able to distinguish any of mumblings anyway. I figured I would do the talking and hope he would not only hear me but understand what I was telling him. (This was all new to me.)

I recounted the details of my being shot in Vietnam, including the images and the voice. I explained how important it was that I remember everything from that day, especially the voice. It was important for a good reason...I was told not to forget, and, like everyone else, I almost did. I had to make him understand not to fear death, because after death it is "okay."

There was just enough light that I could see his eyes. It might have been my imagination, but he now looked different, as if he weren't scared anymore. Once I stopped talking we just continued to star at each other, and believe it or not his moaning never start up again.

I slide back over to my bed, threw my pillow onto the mattress, grabbed on of the steel posts with my left hand, put my good leg underneath me and lifted myself up onto the bed and lay there with contentment of my own. For the first time in my life, I actually felt I made a different in someone's life, not by using my fists, but simply by talking to them.

The next morning, I awoke to see doctors and nurses working frantically on my neighbor...and new friend, I had hoped. Then I heard one of the doctors say, "We've lost him." He had gone into cardiac arrest, and nothing could be done to save him.

A strange feeling came over me. A day earlier, I couldn't have cared less if he had lived or died. Now I was truly sorry but glad that I had gotten the chance to speak with him the night before. I felt very strongly that he understood and believe what I told him. If so, I knew in those last moments he wasn't afraid.

Later that day I had what I considered to be another miraculous coincidence. I was looking at my right hand, just as I had one a hundred times before, when suddenly I started to move my little finger. The movement was slight, but it moved and I felt

confident that I was not only going to regain the use of my right hand and arm, but I was also going to walk again. I just knew it.

From that moment on, I told myself I was going to take one day at a time. And, if I ever felt discouraged, I would fall back on what I can only describe as a spiritual experience, knowing that whatever happens in this life is only a jaunt within an eternal journey that eventually leads us to a much better place.

I didn't resent myself now. I no longer thought of failure as being shot or not serving a full tour in Vietnam.

That night, I apologized to John, the Marine in the other bed next to me. This sudden show of civility completely caught him off guard. I assured him that I wasn't the total asshole I had been earlier during my stay, rather that I hadn't been myself since I had been wounded and paralyzed. Hopefully, I told him, the recollection of something very significant snapped me out of my funk.

I went to bed that night feeling a newfound peace within myself. And I fell asleep actually looking forward to my physical therapy session the next morning.

Morning came and the hours did not pass quickly enough for my trip to the therapy room. Once there, I proudly displayed the movement in my finger to the therapist.

She smiled and told me, "That's a start," but she was still awaiting acknowledgement of my previous regrettable behavior.

By this time, I was getting pretty good at apologizing, and I asked forgiveness for my foul language and sarcastic behavior.

"Let's get started," she responded without hesitation.

Over the next few days, I started to develop a good relationship with her. I was willing, if not completely able, to perform the different exercises she demanded. Her positive energy was starting to have an effect on me, and as frustrated as I might have become at times, I was showing steady improvement. By the end of the week, I could move all my fingers on my right hand, but I still had no movement in my arm or leg.

Without going into any details, I phoned my parents and told them of my progress. They were anxious to see it for themselves, but I still wanted to improve even more before I went home again. I was sure they could feel the enthusiasm in my voice... something that had been missing for awhile. They had no problem waiting a few weeks to see me again. They knew something positive was happening.



About 2 weeks later, I was sifting through some personal papers and came across the phone number of Robert's sister. I remembered that I had promised him I would call her when I got back to the States.

Later that night I finally called her. When she answered the phone, I introduced myself and told her that I had served a short time with her brother in Vietnam. She paused for a second, then told me that Robert had been killed in action. A cold chill came over me as I told her that I thought he was an outstanding Marine and that I was glad to have made friends with him, if only for a short time. I told her I was sincerely sorry...she thanked me...there wasn't much more to be said.

As I hung up, I knew Robert was "okay" but felt his family's sorrow... "Death only hurts the living."

The next morning, I was up bright and early and went in for my physical therapy. I showed only minor improvements, but this day in particular turned out to be very special for me.

I was returning to the ward in my wheelchair when I noticed someone at the far end of the long, isolated corridor. As I got closer, I recognized it was a female...very female...it was Trish!

My heart started pounding so hard I should have been transferred from the neurosurgery ward to the cardiac ward right then and there. She looked absolutely breathtaking. When we first came up to each other we didn't speak. She leaned over, placed both hands on the arms of my chair, bent down until she actually looking up at me. We stared into each other's eyes for a second, and then she stood about halfway up, put both arms around me and gave me a long, emotional hug...I could feel her tears running down the back of my neck. In my whole life, I don't think I was ever so happy to see someone as I was to see Trish.

She told me that she didn't expect to see me in a wheelchair, but if she were shocked, she sure didn't show it. We went out into the courtyard and talked for a couple of hours. The only two things that didn't surface in the conversation were the war and my attitude the last time we talked on the phone.

Our visit ended with her offering to cook dinner the following Saturday night. I was a bit self-conscious about my wheelchair but knew that it was something I was going to have to deal with in my own mind.

And even though Trish didn't look shocked, I needed to convince myself that the wheelchair really wasn't that big of a deal to her. Eventually, though, I did agree...it was a date.

As before, my parents picked me up early Friday morning, and, to say the least, they were pretty impressed and maybe even a little proud of my progress. That night at dinner, I could see that same proud look on my grandparents' faces. It was the first time since I got back from Vietnam that I wasn't trying to put on an act, and I knew they could tell something was different. Don't ask me why, but I never did openly discuss any of the events either in Vietnam or at the hospital with them. All I knew was that we all were on the same positive page now, my parents, grandparents and me...that was good, real good. (Especially for gramps...he never could hide his guilt).

Saturday afternoon I visited with more friends, but again, as usual, the only thing really on my mind was Trish. That evening, my parents drove me down to her house. For whatever reason...maybe I was trying to act a little independent?...I asked them to drop me off a couple of blocks away rather than in front of her house.

I used my left arm, switching it back and forth from one wheel to the other, and pushed myself forward. When I got to her front door, she appeared before I could knock. She not only looked gorgeous, but she had this excitement about her, the same positive energy as my physical therapist. Except that with Trish, it made my heart beat faster without doing any exercising.

She hugged me, gave me a kiss and we went inside the house, where she introduced me to her mother, sister, and her 2-year-old son. (As with her ex, the son was another surprise, but a pleasant one.) the conversation before dinner was enjoyable, nothing in particular and nothing controversial. Dinner turned out pretty well, and as soon as we were finished she put her son down for the night and her mother and sister retired to their rooms.

Trish and I sat and talked for a couple more hours, then she leaned over and pressed her lips against mine. I was glad she made the first move because I was way too self-conscious to initiate anything. Then she laid me down on the couch and unzipped my pants. As masterful as anyone could be, she pulled the legs of her flowered shorts up, slid her silk panties to the side and confidently grabbed my erect penis, gently easing it into her. From that point on, I felt like my old self again...at least for the next "20 minutes" (all right "60 seconds").

Afterwards, Trish drove me home, and on the way she stopped, leaned over, and gave me blow job (just kidding). Actually, on the way we decided to see each other every weekend that I came home from Balboa.

Sunday, my parents drove me back to the hospital. During the following week I progressed significantly. Valium to prevent seizures and antibiotics and shots to prevent infections were a major part of my therapy. The shots were nothing like the 20

or 30 a day I received while in the hospital in Vietnam, though. I was scheduled to have the plastic plate inserted into my skull in 2 weeks. The doctor who was actually going to perform the procedure told me that I would gradually be taken off some of the antibiotics, but that I would have to be on valium for months to come (as if I minded that).

The next weekend, my parents again picked me up, but, except for a brief time, I spent the entire weekend with Trish. Saturday, however, Trish's brother dropped us off at my parents' so that she could meet them for the first time. Trish's outgoing personality enabled everyone to hit it off right away. And my parents got to see, firsthand, how important she was in lifting my spirits.

Later that afternoon my parents had to leave, so Trish and I hung around by ourselves for awhile. When her brother called later and said he couldn't pick us up, Trish offered a suggestion which showed a bit more of her adventurous, uninhibited side: "Let's hitchhike across town back to my house!"

Whether we had other options or now (hey, adventurous, why not...uninhibited, don't forget about the valium), I said, "let's go." Trish pushed and I stuck out my thumb as I had done many times before. As we were going down the road we joked for about 10 minutes, mostly on how stupid we must look, when a sympathetic, if not a little surprised, individual offered us a ride. (I should have used this wheelchair ploy years before.)

The next Monday I was back at the hospital. Back to my regular routine, which included hours and hours with my therapist, who continued with her persistent but compassionate attitude.

During that week I spent a lot of time getting to know the Marine sergeant who was having exploratory surgeries searching for his brain tumor. (I can't remember his name and am getting tired of referring to him as the Marine sergeant who was having exploratory surgery for a brain tumor, so let's just call him Jack.) It bothered me that I had ignored Jack when I first arrived at the hospital.

I helped him out once in awhile with little things, like feeding him his meals or reading the newspaper to him. Then one day he told me, "Tom, they want to operate on me again. I don't want them to."

Evidently, he had no relatives to look out for him. He never had any visitors, so I told him I would try to find out what was going on. For all I knew, the doctors had no other choice but to continue the operations. But I had also heard rumors around the hospital that many surgeons would perform unnecessary operations just to further their experience for when they went into private practice.

I asked the front desk nurse if I could speak to Jack's doctor. She was a little hesitant, but later that afternoon his doctor came by to see me. We decided to go outside the ward and talk. He offered to push me, I had gotten to the point that I could wheel myself fairly well.

I tried to be very diplomatic in my inquiry; the doctor was an officer, and I treated him as such. I explained that I wasn't questioning anyone but that Jack was very reluctant to have further surgery, and I was concerned about his deterioration following each one. "Are they absolutely necessary?" I asked. (That went over real dandy.)

The doctor turned out to be a real prick and reminded me that he was an officer and this wasn't any of my fucking business. Furthermore, if I butted into any of this patients' business again, he would make my life miserable. Then, he got real shitty.

He said that it was already too late, that more exploratory surgery wasn't going to make any difference. The sergeant was already too far gone. If he felt like going into his skull three, four, or a fucking dozen more times, he would. He ordered me to drop it and go back to my ward.

It was apparent that the doctor had already given up on Jack and in reality never really gave him a chance. I truly believed that this was one of those unscrupulous doctors I had heard the rumors about and that he was using poor Jack as a guinea pig.

That Friday, before I left for the weekend, I asked the nurse when Jack was scheduled for his surgery. After checking the chart, she told me it would be the following week. Then I stopped by and reassured Jack that I would try to talk to someone else when I got back. He just smiled and nodded his head.

I spent most of that weekend thinking about Jack. I wanted to do something, but the doctor had made his point perfectly clear, and I didn't want to start something that I couldn't finish.

When I returned Sunday evening, that same nurse whom I had just talked with two days earlier greeted me very apologetically. She told me that she must have been looking at the wrong chart, because Jack had gone through another surgery that Friday just after I had left.

As I thought about it, I was sure that Jack had probably been aware the surgery was more imminent than I realized, but he had no concept of time or he would have said something before I left. I hurried over to his bed. He hardly recognized me. It was like talking to a young child and heartbreaking to see him in that state. In a fit of rage, I wheeled myself back to the nurse's station and demanded that she leave a message for

Jack's doctor. I wanted to see him the very next day...and I didn't want to hear any bullshit about it.

Late the next day the doctor showed up, and just as before we went outside the ward. He was even worse this time, telling me that he wasn't going to explain a fucking thing to me and that if I made accusations against him, he would make my life a living hell.

"Hell," I said, "you don't know what hell is. Hell is what Jack is going through right now!" I continued, "I'll make you a deal. If you don't operate on him again, I'll shut up and never mention it again. But if you cut into his skull one more time, I'll have my parents write their Congressman and ask him to investigate everything that has happened here." Then I started, "I don't know if what you've been doing is right, wrong or excessive. But if I have to I'll find out, and you aren't going to intimidate me." (I didn't have a clue in hell about what I had just said, but it sure got his attention.)

The doctor stared right at me, "You little shit, I'm an officer and a surgeon. No grunt in a fucking wheelchair is going to second-guess me. You can have your parents write anyone they want."

To be honest, he was intimidating me, but I wasn't about to let him know it. I figured I'd gone too far to fold now, so I finished the conversation, "Just operate on Jack again, and you can bank on it."

For what it's worth, Jack never had another surgery at that hospital. I only wished that I had gotten to know him better before so much of him was taken away.

It wasn't long after that he was transferred from Balboa to another hospital. I never heard from or of him again, but I figured the change at least gave him a fighting chance.

The following week, my doctor told me that I was ready to have the plastic plate inserted into my head. There wasn't much danger in the procedure, and, trust me, my doctor was nothing like Jack's. Still, I was fearful that I might lose some of the movement I had regained.

I didn't go home that weekend. Early Monday morning a nurse wheeled me into the bathroom to shave my head. I remember staring into the mirror as she slid the razor over my head and around the wound. My hair dropped to the floor, just like when I was in boot camp. Boot camp, it seemed so long ago.

I had told my parent and Trish that I preferred they not be there when I had the operation. I didn't have any rational reason. It was just the way I felt.

When I awoke from the surgery, the first thing I did was try to move my right arm and hand. I was relieved when they both moved as before. Then I tried my right leg and foot. Still nothing.

Later, I called my parents and Trish and told them everything had gone all right and that I would be home the following weekend.

The next couple of days I was confined to my bed and spent a lot of time thinking about Carp, Stew and Cono. I decided to call Linda to see if she had heard from Cono.

When Linda answered, I started to talk, "Hi, this..." Before I could finish, I heard the phone drop on the other end. When she picked it back up, she was crying. "Are you all right?" I inquired.

"Tom, oh God, it is you," she responded. I heard you had been killed."

After I assured her that I was still very much alive, I explained what had happened and then apologized for not getting in touch with her sooner. Once she calmed down we talked about how she was doing and then I asked if she had heard from her brother.

She told me Cono was doing fine and that he was stationed somewhere near Saigon. As for Carp and Stew, neither she nor her brother had heard anything.

Linda still couldn't believe that I was alive. She said she had a hard time dealing with my "death," and a guy that she was seeing occasionally when we first met had helped her through it. They eventually became engaged and were getting married that following month. I told her the reason I hadn't contacted her was that I had developed a relationship of my own. Linda understood but wanted to see me one more time before she got married. I had no problem with seeing her again, so we arranged to meet that Saturday afternoon.

When the weekend came, I was feeling pretty good, and even though I didn't care too much for all the bandages that adorned my head, I asked a friend to drive me to Torrance, where Linda lived. When we arrived, he helped me out of the car and into my wheelchair, then waited in the car as I wheeled up to her door.

When Linda opened the door, I got as big a shock as she must have had when she first heard my voice on the phone the other day. There she was, standing in the doorway...pregnant!

She smiled, and gave me a big hug. Then I asked her one very pertinent question. "Is it mine?"

She told me she wasn't sure, that she was seeing both me and her fiancé at the same time she became pregnant. When she heard I had been killed, she told her fiancé it was his and that's when they decided to get married.

Linda asked me not to pursue it. She loved her fiancé very much and didn't want him to have doubts about whose child it was. I appreciated her honesty and understood her position. I would respect it.

We talked some more, mostly about her brother, although her conversation at times would drift down the road of "what it's." But by the end of our visit, we had reassured each other that everything was for the best. As I was getting ready to leave, she leaned over and hugged me...out good-bye most definitely seemed permanent. On my way to the car, she yelled to me, "It's going to be a boy. We're naming him Tom." It was like a jolt of lightning, but one that felt good. There was termination without closure.

We smiled at each other, and I continued on to the car where my friend was waiting patiently to take me home.

I was going to see Trish that night and after thinking about it I came to the conclusion it was best not to tell her about Linda...it could serve no purpose...at least that I could see.

It was a strange evening. Trish was very reserved, like her mind was someplace else. I wasn't much better. Linda had given me a lot to think about. The idea of there even being a remote chance that I had a son and wasn't going to see him really bothered me. But I knew I had to be fair to Linda and it was not the time for me to be selfish.

Later that night, Trish did something that surprised me. I accidentally bumped into her coffee table with my wheelchair and knocked a drink over. She got very upset. It was the first time she had ever really made me feel self-conscious about being in a wheelchair, even though it had always been in the back of my mind.

When we said good-bye that night I had a strange feeling, nothing I could put my finger on. I was hoping it wasn't that she was getting tired of me being in a wheelchair. I let it pass, figuring time would tell.

Monday, I was back in rehab. My progress was encouraging; I could move my right hand better and my arm significantly more. It just felt like I had 50 pounds of weight tied to it. I still could not move my right leg or foot, and I had no position sense on my right side.

I would close my eyes and try to touch my nose with my right index finger. Not only would I miss my nose, I couldn't even come close to my head.

Later that week, I progressed to the parallel bars. The therapist positioned me between the bars and had me put my arms over either side of them. Then I would try to make my way to the end. I could move forward with my good leg, but with no possible movement in my right leg, I had to swing it forward while holding tightly to the bars. It was a frustrating exercise because unless I was within the confines of the bars I had no chance of walking by myself.

Because of her strange attitude during our last visit, I was anxious about seeing Trish that coming weekend and hoped she had returned to her old self. On Thursday, however, the night before I was to see her, she called and cancelled. More than that, she said she wasn't sure if she wanted to continue our relationship.

She might just as well have taken a knife and stuck it into my stomach and twisted it a few times. I was devastated. Once I overcame my initial shock, I asked her why, and she told me she was considering returning to her ex yet another time.

"Haven't you gone down that road before?" I questioned. She said, "Yes," but added that her son wanted his father around and she had mixed emotions about me. She wanted time to think about the entire situation.

I searched for the right thing to say, but it was hopeless. I assured her that I wanted to continue seeing her, but that I wouldn't pressure her. She asked me just to be patient and give her some needed time to think.

As we said good-bye, I had a hollow feeling. A feeling, I hoped, I would never experience again. And it had a negative effect on my rehabilitation during the next week. I couldn't put a whole lot of effort into my exercises and, once again, I wasn't the friendliest person to be around.

When I went home the following weekend, I didn't tell anyone...not my parents, not Bernie, Joe, no one...that Trish had broken up with me. I didn't want anyone at home to know anything was wrong. I even went so far as to have my parents drop me off at my usual spot near Trish's house that Saturday night.

After they dropped me off, I wheeled myself in front of her house. It was around eight, drizzling, and I noticed a car parked in her driveway. The car belonged to her ex, who, unfortunately for me, could be seen through the window picking up Trish and swirling her around in a playful manner. (I can't tell you how much that hurt!) I wheeled myself back and forth in front of her house, not really knowing what I was going to do. I even contemplated knocking on the front door, but I didn't have that much nerve.



I felt pretty stupid, just wheeling up and down the street, but I didn't want to go home just then. After about an hour of wandering, I was about a block away from her house when a late-model, two-door Chevy came screeching by me and into the driveway of the house I was passing.

A tall, slightly-built man got out of the car, slammed the door and staggered into the house. It was obvious he had been drinking or was on drugs. Within a few seconds I heard yells and screams coming from the house. Then the front door opened and the same guy was pulling a woman by her hair into the front yard. He was yelling at her, "Get into the fucking car. You're coming with me."

The woman fell to the ground, and instead of trying to pick her up, the guy started punching her. In an attempt to help the woman, I yelled at the guy and he stopped for a second, looked over at me and snapped back, "Mind your own fucking business," then continued his assault.

I tried desperately to wheel myself over to where they were, but I couldn't get my wheels over the bricks separating the garden from the grass. Every time I try, I would rock backwards. I tried yelling again, but he just ignored me.

There was no place to go for help, so I tried getting over the bricks once again, but they were just too high. Frustrated, I did the only thing I could think of. I picked up a good-sized rock from the edge of the garden and threw it through his car door window on the driver side. When he heard the crash, the shattering sounds of glass, he's again stopped. (Talk about getting someone's attention.)

When he realized what I had just done, he pushed the woman's head into the ground and came running over to me, calling me a motherfucker and threatening to beat the shit out of me.

"You're doing a pretty good job on that poor woman," I said. "Let's see how well you do against someone in a wheelchair." and I finished it off with a good, "Asshole." (I figured I was dead anyway, so what the hell!)

Just before he got to me, two neighbors came rushing tortoise. They were both about 6 feet and well over 200 pounds. One grabbed the guy and threw him against the car, and the other went and helped the battered woman get up from the cold, damp grass. Her face was bloodied and she was really hurt, but she asked the neighbors to let her boyfriend go. She didn't want him hurt or the cops involved; she just wanted him to leave.

Without mincing their words, the two men told the boyfriend to get the hell out of there and not to return. They told him if he did come back they'd beat the shit out of him first, then call the cops.

The boyfriend didn't say another word which (was a pretty smart move for such a jack-off.) He just brushed the glass off his car seat, stared briefly at me, and sped off.

The neighbors asked me if I needed a ride anywhere. I told them, "No, thanks. I'm just going right down the street to visit a friend." The woman thanked me for getting involved. She was pretty beat up, and I could only imagine what he would have done had he ever gotten her into his car. I hope that she would smarten up and dump the jerk.

By the time I wheeled myself back to Trish's house, the rain was coming down heavier. Her ex-husband's car was still in the driveway, so I decided to end my foolishness and head on home. Resting here and there, I figured it would take me a couple of hours.

About halfway home the rain started coming down in buckets. A number of people stopped and offered me rides, but I was pretty stubborn and declined each time. Like Trish, I needed time by myself to think. Of course, there were more ideal conditions under which to be searching one's mind.

I came to the realization that I'd come too far, both physically and mentally, to let the situation with Trish destroy me. I didn't know if my being in a wheelchair had any influence on Trish's decision to go back with her ex-husband or not, but I made up my mind...right then...that when I return to the hospital, there was going to be no more messing around. I was going to walk again some way, somehow.

I remembered my days as the eternal optimist and my days as the eternal pessimist. I preferred the former and told myself I was going to be more optimistic about everything, including my relationship with Trish. Invincible? Maybe I wasn't, but hopefully, pretty darn close.

When I arrived home, I was soaked to the bone and dead tired. But I was pumped.

I returned to the hospital with that same enthusiasm. My discharge from the hospital was scheduled in about a month, and I told my physical therapist in no uncertain terms that I would be walking by then. She didn't really make any comment on my ultimatum, but I knew she wanted it almost as much as I did. And I knew if anyone could help me achieve my goal, it most definitely was her.

My confidence had reached a new high during those days, and much of my old attitude and personality was returning. Unfortunately, I was also regaining some of the

mischievous side of my personality. One day John and I talked one of the janitors into sneaking us a couple of bottles of whiskey.

After the nurses shut down the ward for the night, John, two other patients and I got into our Wheelchairs and headed out for the bathroom. We lit up our cigarettes and broke out the whiskey. Within an hour we all were pretty well wasted and decided to move our party into the ward.

Our first stop was to the bed of the 16-year-old who had the steady procession of cheerleaders visiting him.

For a shot of whiskey, he told us he would introduce us to them. He couldn't drink through his mouth, so we had to disconnect a tube and pour a swig of whiskey down it. We were afraid to give him too much, but it gave him a pretty good kick and it picked his spirits right up.

Then we decided to have a wheelchair race around the ward. It would have been hard enough for any of us to keep a straight line sober, but we were bound and determined and lined up next to the kid's bed. He started us off, "One, two, three, go!"

My left arm was much stronger than my right, so every time I started to build up any speed, my wheelchair would veer to the right. It didn't take long before I crashed into a bed and nearly knocked its inhabitant to the floor. Naturally, it startled the shit out of him, and he let out a loud scream. I mean a LOUD scream.

Almost simultaneously, two of my other comrades also crashed into beds, inducing similar reactions from those patients. By then the kid and all four of us were laughing uncontrollably...then, trouble. The lights came on, and two nurses stormed the ward. We were busted big time.

After our whiskey was confiscated, we received a lecture on all the rules we had just violated. Luckily, one of the nurses was pretty cool and gave us a break. (I think she had a crush on me... all right, she was just being nice.) Still, she did make it perfectly clear that this was to be a one-time deal and if there were a next time, we would pay the consequences.

Even though we could have gotten into a lot of trouble, it was worth the risk. The kid got a few minutes away from reality, and so did the four of us.

The next day, it was right back to work. The booze hadn't mixed too well with the Valium. My physical therapist proved most unsympathetic and wasn't about to give me a break. After our session, however, she did have some good news. She told me she had designed a new type of brace for me and that it would be ready by the end of the week. If

it worked, it would allow me - with the aid of crutches - to walk. Hangover or not, after that news, I was feeling just fine.

That night, I was so excited that I wanted to share my optimism with Trish. I phoned her. When she answered, I started off by telling her that I was going to be released from the hospital in just two weeks. Then before I could go into any detail about the prospect of walking again, she cut me off in mid-sentence. Then she went on to say that she and her ex had agreed to marry again.

My fears were just realized. I knew it was happening, but 'why' was the immediate question. However, I wasn't going to ask it; I couldn't handle what I believed all too much was the answer.

I hung up the phone softly. No more was to be said.

I still was not going to let my disappointment with Trish get me down. I fell asleep with the emphatic demand to work myself as hard as I possibly could during the rest of my time at the hospital.

Within the next couple of days I got my leg brace. It went from my foot all the way past the top of my right thigh. When I sat down, I could unlock a hinge that was placed at the knee. When I stood up, it would lock rigid.

With the use of crutches I could move my good leg forward first, then swing my bad leg forward. For the next 2 weeks, I practiced this procedure over and over, using the parallel bars and the crutches. I worked as hard on this as I had ever worked on anything in my life.

Those two weeks were very productive. I was learning to master the brace and crutches, and as I progressed I could see the gratification on my physical therapist's face. After all, it was she who came up with the idea and design for the contraption that was allowing me to stand and walk.

Finally, that special day came. I was to be released from the hospital. I was so excited that I got up extra early that morning to get all of my personal belongings together. I wanted to be sure everything was taken care of before my parents arrived to pick me up. After I packed, I slipped my brace on, tightened the straps and grabbed my new crutches.

I still had a couple of hours to kill before they came, so I took my time saying good-bye to everyone. As I was waiting to have a nurse take me to the main floor, one of the nurses I had gotten to know pretty well asked me to do her a favor.

She asked me to talk to the parents of another Marine patient. He had part of his head blown away in a firefight in Vietnam. His parents were visiting him for the first

time and weren't handling it too well. She was hoping I could talk to them and give them some hope, some encouragement. I was more than willing to oblige.

The nurse pointed out a black Marine and his despondent parents. (The father was tall and thin, almost on the frail side...the wife, short and heavy.) When I walked over to them, the Marine was just staring into space and his parents were sobbing. It was so sad to see the look on their faces, with their son lying there, his mutilated head seeping blood onto his pillow. He was motionless and there was nothing they could do for him.

For a brief moment I thought back to the green stench of Vietnam, lying in my own blood... But only for a brief moment.

I introduced myself and asked if we could go outside the ward and talk for a minute. I told him about my headshot. I went into every detail of the images and the voice. I wanted them to believe...I wanted them to have faith...hope.

I continued to tell them that just a few months earlier I was completely paralyzed on my right side but that I was now going to walk out of the hospital. I wanted them to understand that if they had faith in the fact that it's "okay" after death, then the strength they drew from that knowledge could be passed on to their son.

The mother reached over to me and gave me a kiss on the cheek. Then the father hugged me. They told me how special they thought I was and that I must have been picked "not to forget" for a reason.

I left thinking they were special, too. They were showing strength at a time when weakness came easy.

I felt inspired as the nurse helped me down to the main floor of the hospital where I would wait for my ride. Then, to my shock, pulling up about 50 feet from the main entrance was Trish, not my parents. I waited until she got out of the car, then I started to walk out.

With my crutches under my arms and my brace rigid, I moved forward. First my good leg, then I would swing my bad leg around... Step by step. When I finally reached her, she had tears in her eyes. We didn't talk, we just stood there and hugged. This time no tears ran down my neck.

I spoke first, telling her that one reason I thought she went back with her ex-husband was that she was getting tired of me being in a wheelchair. She looked up at me with an expression of concern and said that she didn't care if I was in a wheelchair or not, even though she was very proud of me when I walked up to her. It was just that she

had made some stupid decisions in regard to what she thought was best for her son at that time. She promised she wouldn't repeat those mistakes. Her ex was out for good.

Then it was my turn to talk again. I told her that even if what she had just said were true, that deep down I always felt that it would be hard for her to fall in love with me while I was confined to a wheelchair.

Trish looked straight into my eyes with such an innocent look of confusion and said, "Silly, I've always loved you. From the day you said, "Two hamburgers, fries, a large Coke, and, by the way, how about dinner tonight?" to the day I first saw you in the wheelchair... and as we are standing here now." (Hell, I didn't par the last hole, I just birdied it!!!) I smiled and said, "Let's go home."

As we drove away, down the twisting palm-lined driveway, I looked back at the drab beige buildings sprawling beneath the blue California sky. I thought about the Marine that I had just seen, his parents, the pain that lay ahead of them. How fortunate I was to have so much behind me. I thought about the images, about never forgetting again and that voice...the one that assured me... "IT'S OKAY."