(W)RONG SONG
An Original Novel

APPROVED:

W. F. Belcher
Major Professor

F. M. Ousley
Minor Professor

J. F. Kohl
Consulting Professor

W. F. Belcher
Chairman of Graduate Studies in English

Robert B. Toulouze
Dean of the Graduate School
Hall, David G., (W)RONG SONG: An Original Novel.
Master of Arts (English), August, 1972, 472 pp.

The novel concerns the massacre of a small village in Viet Nam and its effects upon those involved, attempting to show that selfishness in men overrides any other concern, even during war. The characters are representative, on the whole, of each level of the army's chain of command, and each is oblivious to all but his own interests. The massacre of the innocent civilians at Rong Song becomes only a tool for each man to seek personal revenge on his superior by fixing the blame a notch or two above himself. In none of the characters is there real remorse over the dead Vietnamese, except in the lone survivor of Rong Song, an old peasant who mourns continually the loss of his family and friends. Although the old man is seen periodically through the novel, as a reminder of the seriousness of the massacre, he is ignored or abused by the other characters, including a U.S. Senator, whose investigation of the massacre is more a personal vendetta against the Army than an attempt to seek justice for the murders.

A second aspect of the novel concerns human error in war and its devastating results. The annihilation of Rong Song is a mistake, the result of a commanding general's misunderstanding of a single phrase. From this stems the operation that takes the lives of many peaceful Vietnamese, and, as
the novel ends, a similar misunderstanding is already spawning another disastrous attack on yet another friendly village.

Human greed and human fallibility are the themes of this novel about a massacre that need never have occurred but that is likely to be repeated so long as men are the agents of war.
(W)RONG SONG
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THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the North Texas State University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

David Gibbard Hall, B. A.

Denton, Texas

August, 1972
Specialist Fourth Class Mike Johnson was only half-awake when the siren sounded. He knew what it meant and didn't move. Dozens of times in the past ten months he'd scrambled out of bed and run barefoot to one of the big dirt-packed bunkers, cutting his feet on the little rocks that hid in the dirt of the battery area.

He heard startled voices in the barracks: "Incoming!" "Come on, let's move!" The new men always did that, he thought sleepily, always lost their heads and ran stark naked and shaking to huddle in the bunkers. It was too hot to sleep in clothes and there was never time to don any before the mortar rounds fell.

Bullshit, Spec Four Johnson thought.

He lay awake and listened. The others had all piled outside in a mad jumbled rush. He heard their voices die out in the distance, leaving the barracks quiet and peaceful. Spec Four Johnson looked around and chuckled, realizing he was again the only one left. He grinned in the dark and strained his ears against the hot, humid blackness outside.

The stillness soon yielded what he expected. Three dull thuds sounded somewhere far-off, followed by several more, only slightly louder. The louder ones were undoubtedly closer, Spec Four Johnson knew, but still not close enough to worry about. They never were. He waited. Nothing. Somewhere in the dust of the roads and in the muddy water of
the paddies that surrounded the battery, a half-dozen craters had appeared as a result of the attack. Attack. Spec Four Johnson rolled over and closed his eyes. Hell, he'd had worse asthma attacks.

He was asleep when the others came back. The newcomers to the battery were chattering excitedly.

One of them pointed to Spec Four Johnson, who lay naked on his bed, peacefully snoring.

"Sumbitch don't even know there's a war goin' on."

"He knows," someone informed the new boy. "He just don't give a damn."

And it was true. Spec Four Johnson worked in "A" Battery's Fire Direction Center, and he had long ago stopped caring about the war. It was a bore. Like so many others who worked a regular shift sitting down seven days a week, Spec Four Johnson found the whole affair incredibly boring. The fact that it was his job to plot the artillery fire that devastated villages and killed hundreds of people did nothing to relieve the monotony. He never saw the destruction he helped direct or the troops he supposedly saved in the course of his day. Reports filtered in occasionally, from the infantry in the field, of high body counts attributed to the artillery. Spec Four Johnson knew the counts were always absurdly exaggerated, and yet he and the other men in FDC continued to tack up strings of paper dolls representing the dead men. It was senseless, but he supposed it gave them
all a link of sorts with the war they were told was bursting out all around them. It gave them some puny semblance of a reason for being there.

Someone tapped Spec Four Johnson on the shoulder, and he woke up slowly. He never jerked awake stifling a scream like he had heard the grunts in the field did. He came slowly up to the surface of the blackness and opened one eye.

"Hey, man, the captain wants to see you."

Spec Four Johnson's eyes focused slowly on Peters, the black ammo sergeant.

"You the CQ?" he yawned.

Peters lit a cigarette.

"Naw, man, I'm the Donut Dolly. Now you better get your ass up. The old man's pissed off. I wouldn't waste no time if I was you."

Spec Four Johnson swung his legs onto the floor. He felt the gritty sand on the floor under his feet. Like living on the beach, he thought drowsily. He watched Sergeant Peters leaning against the wall smoking, looking like a big crow. At least if he was home, he wouldn't have to worry about big dumb black men waking him up in the dark.

Sergeant Peters offered him a cigarette.

"No thanks. I'm trying to quit."

Sergeant Peters grinned broadly.

"That sounds like you, Johnson. Come to Viet Nam and quit smokin' for your health."
Spec Four Johnson put on his fatigues and slipped his feet into a pair of rubber thonged shower shoes.

Sergeant Peters shook his head.

"Old man ain't goin' to like that, Johnson. Better put your boots on."

Spec Four Johnson ignored him and went out the door.

Two weeks before, he had sat all night dangling his feet in the fetid ditch water that ran through the battery area. He knew the infantry often got at least a week off duty or even in the hospital when the fungus from the water turned their feet red and scaly. After sitting almost a year in the tiny FDC room seven days a week, Spec Four Johnson had been ready to try anything to relieve the monotony. But it hadn't worked. Even though his feet had gotten suitably raw and red and scaly, Captain Watson had just scowled and told him to start wearing shower shoes when he went to the shower.

Spec Four Johnson sighed as he walked painfully to the battery commander's office. The hospital would have been a nice change of scenery. Now he was stuck with rotting feet that wouldn't heal.

Captain Morley Watson sat in his swivel rocker, a fancy black naugahyde contraption, that looked out of place in the plain, dark little plywood office. Captain Watson hated the thought of sitting out the war in command of a battery when he could be flying liaison in a chopper, lording it over the
forward observers and gathering a bright array of ribbons for his left pocket. He thought, as he watched the orange rising sun out his screen door, of the golden mornings at Fort Benning and the glorious promises that had spurred him through Ranger school and the fine stirring songs of the Airborne school.

What a waste, he thought sadly. And to be burdened now in his agony with dead weights like Johnson, who managed somehow to get immersion-foot in the middle of the dustiest damned half-acre in Viet Nam. But it wasn't for that that he had sent for Johnson.

It was because of the mortar attacks and the way Johnson casually ignored them. Captain Watson hated paperwork, and he could visualize the mountain of it that would be dumped on his desk if Johnson ever happened to be blown away during a mortar attack. Captain Watson hated paperwork so badly that he often had nightmares in which he was chained like a galley slave to his desk and forced to fill out every DA form and DD form the army possessed -- in triplicate. In his nightmare, he would be signing his name to thousands upon thousands of dotted lines, and behind his back cold-eyed teams of army CID investigators would stand watching his shaking hand as if it were a snake, waiting for a chance to chop it off. Lord, how he hated paperwork. And he could see reams of it pouring onto his desk asking why, how, when, where Spec Four Johnson had died. And he thought nervously of the cold-eyed investigators grilling him maniacally about why
this man wasn't awakened during the mortar attack and why
Captain Watson hadn't seen to it personally and how would
the captain like to spend the rest of his tour de-frocked
and humiliated, sitting behind an obscure headquarters desk
waiting for his captaincy to expire?

Captain Watson closed his eyes. A loud knock at the door
jarred him back to the waking present.

"Specialist Fourth Class Johnson reporting as ordered,
sir."

Captain Watson wondered if he could simply ignore the
man. Then he remembered he had sent for the silly bastard.

"Come in, Johnson," he said tiredly. "Sit down."

Captain Watson felt very tired and old. He looked at the
floor a moment to compose his frown and noticed Spec Four
Johnson's feet.

"Where are your boots, soldier?" he demanded. "How
dare you come in here barefoot?"

Spec Four Johnson glanced at his feet.

"I'm not barefoot, sir. I have on my shower shoes."

Captain Watson looked again.

"What do you mean coming in here with shower shoes?"

Spec Four Johnson looked puzzled.

"Sir, I really can't go without them. The dust would
inflict my feet."

Captain Watson thought vaguely of strangling the soldier
and hiding his body under the mess hall. He tried to stay calm.
"Your boots, Johnson. Where are your boots?"
"Under my bunk, sir."
Captain Watson glared at the man.
"Why aren't you wearing them, goddamnit?"
Spec Four Johnson gazed back innocently.
"My feet, sir. They're still infected."
Captain Watson felt his face growing hot. He looked at Spec Four Johnson's feet. They were red and raw, and scaly patches had begun crusting the outer edges of the redness. He frowned.
"Looks like you've been soaking them in the damn ditch."
Spec Four Johnson coughed and fumbled for a cigarette. He lit one and looked up at Captain Watson.
"May I smoke, sir?"
"No."
Spec Four Johnson stopped in the middle of a drag and choked noisily. He looked around for an ashtray. Captain Watson didn't smoke, and there were none to be found. He wet the end of his index finger and dabbed at the cigarette, burning himself several times.
Captain Watson watched incredulously.
"For God's sake, man, put that cigarette out."
As a last resort, Spec Four Johnson spit at the cigarette. The first time, he missed and spat directly on his knee. The second time, he held the cigarette closer, and the glowing tobacco sputtered and went black. He put the cigarette in his pocket and smiled at the captain.
Captain Watson wondered seriously how long it would take for Johnson's body to smell up the mess hall. He quickly calculated his own time remaining in the country and dismissed the idea temporarily. He looked at Johnson hard, the way he had been taught in the career course at Fort Sill.

"Did you hear the siren last night, Johnson?"

Spec Four Johnson sat back, somewhat stunned as he realized why he had been called here. He had thought it was because of his feet, and he had at least four believable stories about how he had contracted the fungus in the middle of Viet Nam's dust bowl. This question left him vulnerable. He groped for a quick comeback.

"Yes, sir -- I heard it."

Captain Watson's eyes narrowed. He knew they were narrowing. He had seen them narrow this way in the mirror many times before, when he had been rehearsing for other occasions like this. He knew he could narrow them quite evilly.

"Then why didn't you get up with the rest of the men and go to the bunker?"

Spec Four Johnson wondered why the captain was squinting. He leaned closer so the captain could see him better. He was thinking more clearly now, and his excuses were arranging themselves in orderly fashion facing the question.

"My feet hurt so bad that I couldn't walk on them, sir."

Captain Watson leaned back in his chair. The soldier seemed to be crouching to spring at him, and it made him nervous.
"They hurt, do they? Well, they seem to be all right now. You walked over here, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir," Spec Four Johnson agreed quickly. "It's only at night. The air at night seems to irritate the infection, and the feet swell up so bad that I can't walk on them." Perhaps the hospital was still a possibility, he thought.

Captain Watson looked strangely at the young man. He didn't recall ever hearing that before. Maybe Johnson would be better off in the hospital. If he were blown away by a mortar round some night, the CID men would never believe he had swollen feet, unless the feet were found later and actually proved to be swollen. But that might not be until the following morning, when the swelling would have subsided. And besides, Captain Watson thought miserably, the CID men would still ask why the man hadn't been placed in the hospital if his feet were so horribly swollen that the man couldn't even run to shelter during a mortar attack.

Captain Watson closed his eyes and thought longingly of OCS and the rifle range where he had qualified as expert and of the last map test, when he had scored the highest grade in the class. All that promise, he decided, could not be allowed to die here, trampled by a pair of swollen, scaly, enlisted feet. He opened his eyes.

"Johnson, you're going to the hospital."

Spec Four Johnson's jaw dropped.

Captain Watson got up and walked to the door.
"We'll have you out of here as soon as you can get your gear together. So get on with it and report back to me when you're ready." He didn't want another night to fall on the man's head.

Spec Four Johnson arose and, trying to hide his joy, saluted stiffly and left. Outside, he stopped briefly to scratch his head, dumbstruck by the suddenness of the miracle. He grinned and went on.

Captain Watson saw Johnson scratching his head. He wondered if the fungus had spread to the man's head. He pictured Johnson covered from head to toe with the rot. As he thought of this, his own scalp began to tingle. He went to the door to curse at Johnson, but he was already gone. Captain Watson scratched his head and cursed — he had to get the bastard out quickly.

Walking into the back room where he slept, Captain Watson thought briefly of his career. He sighed and shook his head sadly and lay down. He dozed off and dreamed that he had fallen into a deep drainage ditch and was drowning in the filthy water. He could look up in his dream and see Johnson grinning on the bank above him, scratching his head and filling out the necessary papers.

Colonel Majeskie, commander of the Third Infantry Brigade, paced his office. He paced his office floor so much that he had worn noticeable ruts that formed an oval surrounding his
desk. It made his desk look somewhat like an island, or a castle guarded by a moat. And, in fact, that was rather the way Colonel Majeskie felt about his desk. In a country filled with opium-crazed Orientals who would gladly toss a grenade under your bunk for a can of C-rations, his desk was his castle. He had plated it with thick steel on all sides, and the back of the chair was steel, also.

When Colonel Majeskie sat at his desk, with his legs safely underneath the steel desk, the only parts of his body showing and vulnerable were his chest and head. But a man of Colonel Majeskie's ingenuity and constant fear was not to be defeated so easily. He had laid another big sheet of steel on top of the desk and had it polished until it shone like a frozen lake. It was hinged, almost imperceptibly, to the front of the desk, so that, with a stamp of his foot on a button under the desk, Colonel Majeskie could send the steel top swinging up to a vertical position, pushed by strong coiled springs, until it stood up like a solid steel piano top. Any Oriental who tossed a grenade in the front door, or any drunken vengeful private who did the same, would be in for a surprise when Colonel Majeskie strolled out on his porch moments later, smelling the evening air and contentedly smoking a cigar. He had even bought several expensive cigars a few months earlier and kept them now in a locked drawer of the desk, ready to pull out and light at the drop of a grenade.

Only one thing still bothered Colonel Majeskie, and it was this that set him to pacing every day at this time.
The rear window of Colonel Majeskie's office faced directly into the laundry across the big drainage ditch, the laundry where Vietnamese girls worked all day washing and ironing the GI jungle fatigues. Colonel Majeskie had spent hopeless hours lying awake pondering the problem. How easily he could be shot or grenaded through that window, or even stabbed by a long-armed marauder while he sat at his desk. He sweated each time he thought of it, and when he sweated, he had to change uniforms and send the damp ones to the laundry. A vicious circle, he moaned to himself at night.

Colonel Majeskie would have loved to seal off the window with a big sheet of steel plating, but there was another, an overwhelming, consideration. Sometimes in the afternoons, the girls in the laundry got too hot working over the tubs and pulled off their shirts and worked bare-breasted.

Being a happily-married man, Colonel Majeskie went wild each time. He became obsessed with the girls. He whispered lovingly to them across the ditch, he wrote poems about them and even composed dirty songs about them that he sang to himself. Colonel Majeskie hadn't had a woman in over five months, since he had left his family at Fort Benning, and the sight of the bare-breasted natives nearly drove him insane.

He had borrowed the binoculars of every battalion commander in the brigade and had never returned any of them, because in the height of frenzy, Colonel Majeskie always dashed the glasses to the floor, shattering the lenses. The brigade had begun suffering tremendous numbers of casualties
over the past few months, because the commanders couldn't always see what was going on, and also because Colonel Majeskie, in his harried state of mind, kept sending battalions on tough missions and forgetting where he had sent them.

And, in the meantime, Colonel Majeskie lived a tortured existence, trapped helplessly in the awful middle of a terrible dilemma that only the war could have created. He sat praying at his desk all morning, waiting for the Viet Cong bullet that would splatter his brains all over his desk or the grenade that would do much worse. He sat all afternoon massaging his groin and whispering lovesick chants to the chattering, bare-breasted maidens across the ditch, completely forgetting in his passion the bullets and the grenades. At night, he lay in a pool of sweat in his steel-plated bunk, worrying about forgetting the window. When he finally managed to sink into a fitful sleep, he dreamed of the girls in the laundry tossing grenades across the ditch at the open window while their sweet breasts jiggled with their laughter. Sometimes he awoke with a start and went to sit under his desk and wait for the dawn and curse his fate. He wished he were back with Madeleine and the kids and the five-day weeks of the stateside army. He knew that both the Viet Cong terrorists and the girls in the laundry worked seven-day weeks, and the thought completely cancelled out his own week-ends. He couldn't leave the window open, and he couldn't seal it off, so he did the former and took up religion.
Colonel Majeskie called in the chaplain twice a day, first in the morning to hear confession and again in the afternoon to administer last rites. Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher, the brigade chaplain, thought the colonel was perhaps the least bit eccentric, but he had seen stranger things in the war, and he continued to do Colonel Majeskie's bidding. He prayed sometimes, too, for the men in the brigade who died in the missions Colonel Majeskie ordered and then forgot. He had at first thought the colonel very inconsiderate to send his men into enemy-controlled areas and then forget where he had sent them until a helicopter from headquarters was sent out to find them. Often, of course, it was too late for reinforcements, and the men were all dead. Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher considered it very poor tactics to operate like that.

Of course, he always conceded to himself, he didn't know the colonel's long-range objectives, and he certainly knew less than the colonel about military strategy. He had decided, on the whole, that Colonel Majeskie was a dedicated man burdened with the awesome decisions of a whole brigade, a man who needed God's helping hand. So Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher kept praying for the colonel, and sometimes he prayed for the colonel's men who so often died fighting in ambushes. Yes, the chaplain concluded, Colonel Majeskie was a bit eccentric, but who wasn't in time of war?

But the chaplain, despite his concern, couldn't begin to understand the awful complexities of Colonel Majeskie's
situation. Neither could Colonel Majeskie as he sat this morning at his desk, tired from pacing, knowing that his head must be sticking above the window like a balloon in a carnival dart game. He closed his eyes and muttered a quick prayer to be spared for at least one more afternoon.

When he opened his eyes, he saw Sergeant Hightower, his personal clerk, standing before him, watching intently. Sergeant Hightower's small office adjoined Colonel Majeskie's, and it irritated the colonel that Hightower was constantly sneaking in on him at embarrassing moments. Colonel Majeskie was embarrassed now to be caught praying -- colonels had no need of prayers, they had told him at the War College, and he had believed it religiously until now, until the brown tits and the sniper outside the back window. He knew he was weak to pray, but he also knew he was too weak not to pray. Still he didn't like Hightower sneaking around catching him at it.

"A little early in the morning for parlor tricks, Hightower," he said sharply. "And don't think I was praying. I wasn't." Colonel Majeskie saw nothing wrong in lying to NCO's.

Sergeant Hightower wasn't surprised at the colonel's words. He had thought for a long time that Colonel Majeskie was an incompetent maniac who should be relieved of his command and banished to permanent latrine duty. Everything the colonel said to him only strengthened that conviction.

"Parlor tricks, sir?" he said.
"Sneaking up on me like that. Thought you'd catch me praying, didn't you?"

"But, sir," Sergeant Hightower said wearily, "I knocked on your door for ten minutes."

Colonel Majeskie bristled indignantly.

"Did I tell you to come in?" Impertinence in NCO's had always rankled Colonel Majeskie.

"No, sir, but I knew you were sleeping. I thought you might be sleeping."

"Sleeping?" Colonel Majeskie raised his eyebrows.

"Young man, do you think for one moment that I could allow myself the luxury of sleeping? With the decisions I have to make? With the burdens I have to shoulder?" He snorted.

"Sleeping! Absurd!"

Colonel Majeskie yawned. He felt terribly tired from sitting under his desk all night. He looked up to find Sergeant Hightower still there. Sergeant Hightower, he remembered, was one of those fanatical young men who had graduated high in his class at NCO school and who felt compelled by some inner need to stand around until an order was given or a message delivered or one taken away. He stood there, Colonel Majeskie noticed disgustedly, straight as a stick, his short blond hair giving him the tailored, crew-cut, boyish look of a Gestapo man. Colonel Majeskie always felt nervous when Hightower was around. He had long suspected Hightower of thinking him an incompetent who should be relieved
of command and banished to permanent latrine duty, and every-
thing Hightower said or did only strengthened that suspicion.

Colonel Majeskie looked up at Sergeant Hightower and
yawned.

"Well, what do you want, Hightower?"

"General Rush is coming to see you, sir."

Colonel Majeskie swallowed his yawn noisily. The one
person in the world he feared most and least wanted to see
was General Rush. Not that General Rush was particularly
fearsome, but it was he who held Colonel Majeskie's life in
his hands. At any mad moment, he might choose to send
Colonel Majeskie up in a helicopter to survey and direct
his troops in the field, like the other brigade commanders
did.

At first, Colonel Majeskie had been blessed in having
good battalion commanders who executed their maneuvers per-
fectly and with complete disregard for Colonel Majeskie's
orders. They had earned wide recognition for the brigade.
But Colonel Majeskie had finally gotten irritated at not
having his orders followed, and he had threatened all five
battalion commanders with courts-martial if they disobeyed
his orders again. Impertinence in his officers had always
rankled Colonel Majeskie.

One by one, as Colonel Majeskie's plans were carried out
to a "T", the battalion commanders had fallen in ambushes.
With his mind filled with visions of breasts and snipers,
Colonel Majeskie had sent battalion after battalion into hopeless ambushes, until only one battalion commander remained: Major Dyke.

"Bull" Dyke, as his men called him, had somehow survived the suicide missions. It fell to him, as Colonel Majeskie saw the actual responsibility of field command creeping steadily closer to himself, to command each battalion in turn as its time came to go out on operation. The ruse had worked well for a long while, and Colonel Majeskie had managed, by promising Major Dyke early retirement out of the colonel's own pocket, to hide the loss of commanders and keep the brigade operational. Major Dyke had been very mercenary and had been willing to lead all the battalions in exchange for a pension from Colonel Majeskie.

But two days ago, Major Dyke had disappeared and was reported living in Saigon, running a discreet brothel for chaplains. Left with only a handful of inexperienced captains to command his battalions, Colonel Majeskie had trembled fearfully for two days, deathly afraid that General Rush would schedule an operation. And now the general was here. Colonel Majeskie shuddered. He looked at Sergeant Hightower.

"Tell him I'm out."

"I can't, sir. He knows you're here. He said he saw your head through the back window when he was inspecting the laundry."

Colonel Majeskie drew his head into his collar like a turtle. The sudden thought of the open window behind him
and his own tender, exposed head for a moment blotted out his fear of General Rush.

Sergeant Hightower watched the colonel squirm. He was reminded of all the jokes about chicken-hearted officers he had heard at NCO school. He felt sorry for the men whose deaths had been so cruelly expedited by Colonel Majeskie's gross incompetence.

"What should I tell the general?" he asked, anxious to get out and away from Colonel Majeskie.

Colonel Majeskie knew very well what he'd like to tell General Rush, but he also knew what he would tell the general, and there was a wide world between the two. He tried to compose himself. If the meeting was inevitable, as it certainly was, he might as well draw himself up to a full colonel's status and show Hightower how a senior officer reacts to crises. He was rather ashamed of having seemed so weak-kneed when Hightower had told him of General Rush's visit. Colonel Majeskie set his face and tried to keep from thinking whether or not his bulky frame could possibly slip through the back window unobserved. He put a tight smile on his face and looked at Hightower.

"Tell him? Why, tell him to come in, of course. Just as soon as he gets here."

"He'll be here in a few minutes," Sergeant Hightower said. "He sent somebody over from the laundry to say he was coming."

Sergeant Hightower locked coldly at the colonel.
"Yes, sir," he said flatly and left.

After Hightower left, Colonel Majeskie sat playing with the ebony and gold penholder on his desk. He supposed he'd have to break out his expensive cigars for the general. He hated to, because he knew General Rush would end up with all of them. He put the ebony and gold penholder in the desk drawer where the cigars were kept and set the cigars on the desk. Better to lose the cigars, expensive as they were, than the pen-holder, which had been given to him by his wife Madeleine on their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. He had told her at the time that gold was for the fiftieth, but she had cried so hard that he had finally admitted his mistake and promised to keep the pen-holder with him always. Besides, it was really a nice piece of workmanship. He liked it and wanted to keep it. Just a month before, he had lost his favorite ashtray to General Rush and had kept a cheap plastic one on hand ever since in case General Rush stopped in to find the other one that matched it.

It wasn't just that General Rush was one of those people who steal towels from hotels to keep as souvenirs. General Rush's problem went deeper than that. As a boy, he had been arrested several times for shoplifting. The last time, the
judge had given him a choice of jail or the army. He had chosen jail, but World War Two was just breaking out, and he was drafted while court was in session. Somehow, he had managed to survive the war and emerged a captain. By the time Korea rolled into the headlines, he was a lieutenant colonel, and now the Viet Nam war had made him a major general.

But General Rush had never gotten over his boyhood compulsion to take unpaid-for articles out of stores and even offices and homes he visited. At one time, just after he had made full colonel and was stationed at Fort Dix, in the dead heat of summer, he had started wearing a big green winter overcoat everywhere he went, just for that purpose. The men at Fort Dix had stared in amazement to see him bundled up in the sweltering ninety-degree heat. Some suggested to each other that it must be part of a reducing plan. Others dismissed it as the irrational act of a fool. A few went so far as to snicker and say he was maybe a shoplifter. Still, many of the younger soldiers found the colonel's stamina inspiring and began to wear overcoats, too. General Rush, then Colonel Rush, had seen the men and had gone immediately to the PX to warn the manager of a rash of shoplifters in the area.

Actually, General Rush didn't really want the things he stole. It was an almost unconscious thing, and he was often genuinely surprised to find his pockets full of unfamiliar
items. When this happened, General Rush usually gave the things to charities. He had sent over a dozen Seiko wrist-watches to the Heart Association and had given away hundreds of packs of cigars to Vietnamese orphanages.

He was often stopped, on his first offense in a new area, by belligerent, dedicated store clerks, who summoned M.P.'s to arrest him. But this tapered off after General Rush had several M.P.'s court-martialed for insolence. Even though he was rarely stopped in the PX anymore, he took precautions. Each time he visited the PX, he took with him one of his staff members, into whose pockets he would secretly stuff razor blades and soap and condoms and cigars. This way, General Rush could satisfy his urges without taking any unnecessary risk. Occasionally, as they left the store, General Rush and the staff officer would be approached by a sharp-eyed store manager. General Rush would look shocked as the protesting staff officer emptied out pockets full of small articles he had never touched. General Rush always fixed things up, though, threatening to close the PX and draft the manager. Then he would put his big arm around the bewildered officer's shoulders and sympathetically tell the embarrassed man how he, too, had fallen victim to the same criminal urges when he was young and reckless. The officer would go to bed that night utterly humiliated and perplexed and eternally grateful to General Rush for fixing things up. Invariable, he never again entered a PX.
Colonel Majeskie waited like a condemned man. With Major Dyke gone, there was nowhere else to shift the command. He sweated when he thought of flying in a helicopter over all those Viet Cong guns. He knew they would all be pointed at his command chopper. It made his skin crawl. He remembered painfully when he had been in charge of the Officer's Club at Fort Benning and General Rush had come back from his first tour in Viet Nam. Word went out within a few months that General Rush was sending all the colonels who hadn't been in the war to Viet Nam to give them valuable command time.

That was General Rush's favorite phrase, and he tossed it out like most people would "hello" or "goodbye." He used it all the time, even when what he said made very little sense. "All these goddamn hippies need is a little command time," he would say, and everyone would nod and wonder what he meant. "I'd rather have command time than a new Buick," he'd say and pound his meaty fist on the bar.

After hearing of General Rush's plans to ship out the colonels, Colonel Majeskie hadn't waited to be sent to Viet Nam. He was settled in Georgia with a family and a home and over twenty years in the army. He had only stayed in to run the club at Benning and set up a savings account so his kids could go to college. But with the very real prospect of Viet Nam facing him, Colonel Majeskie had decided his kids could work their way through college. He would retire
immediately and set up a small club in Columbus for lieutenants who felt too intimidated when they went to the Officers Club, which was usually dominated by drunken colonels and even a general or two. General Rush would not manipulate his fate as he did the other colonels.

Colonel Majeskie had walked out of the Officers Club blind drunk that day, the day of his momentous decision. He needed courage for such a defiant move. He felt downright rebellious as he staggered into Personnel grinning broadly and signed his name to a list of Viet Nam volunteers. Not until he was on the plane to Viet Nam had Colonel Majeskie fully realized what he had done. The moving finger writes, and having writ, moves on -- Colonel Majeskie remembered that from his school days as he thought in horror of his mistake. The stewardesses had given him extra portions on his meals and even extra pillows, but nothing helped. Colonel Majeskie had cried all the way to Viet Nam.

Colonel Majeskie pushed the articles around on his desk. He made a quick inventory to see which ones were expendable. He decided he could afford to lose them all if it would please General Rush -- the ashtray, the paperweight in the shape of a howitzer, the little box with the rubber bands and paperclips, the cigars, even the framed picture of Madeleine and the kids. It could all go to make General Rush happy.

Colonel Majeskie looked at his watch. It was noon, the terrible transition period between the morning's aching fear
of the sniper at the back window and the afternoon's aching
desire for the laundry girls. It was noon, the brief moment
when the fear hit its zenith. Regardless of what he was
doing, all Colonel Majeskie could do at this miserable moment
was close his eyes and pray for a chance to see the afternoon
sun that would drive the laundry girls to half-nudity. It
was a tense time, an instant that dragged into eternity, and
didn't end until he heard the girls giggling as they returned
from lunch. Then the sniper was forgotten, his bullets
melted by lust. But now, Colonel Majeskie sat with his eyes
closed, waiting for the patient, ever-present sniper to wipe
out the afternoon, and all afternoons, to blow a jagged hole
in the back of his trembling head. He prayed unabashedly.
He wished the chaplain were there.

Suddenly, Colonel Majeskie thought he heard the girls
giggling. His heart stood still. He listened closer. Yes!
Yes, he did! He opened his eyes with a sigh of joyous relief.

Wap!

Colonel Majeskie felt something slam hard into the back
of his head. The force of the blow jerked his head forward
and back like a whip. He felt himself blacking out. My
God! he thought. It's over!

As his body went rigid, Colonel Majeskie's foot fell on
the trigger button under the desk. The top sprang up. Its
contents were catapulted into the face of General Rush.
General Rush stood in the doorway glaring at Colonel Majeskie. A paper clip hung from one of the metal stars on his collar.

Colonel Majeskie lay motionless on the floor, wondering how he was managing to hang on so long to life. His head hurt and the room spun around him.

Suddenly, a face appeared at the window. It was that of Specialist Four Nolan, the mail clerk.

"Sorry, Colonel, sir," he grinned. "Just thought you'd like to have your book. Didn't mean to hit you." With that, the face disappeared.

Colonel Majeskie looked up at General Rush, who stood holding Colonel Majeskie's newly-delivered Reader's Digest. He glared at the colonel.

"Expecting me, Majeskie?"

Colonel Majeskie teetered a moment on the thin line between utter humiliation and pure, joyful thankfulness at being spared.

Quickly, he recovered his senses and scrambled to his feet.

"Oh, yes, sir," he stuttered. "Yes, sir, I, uh, was certainly expecting you."

With a sheepish smile and a mumbled apology, Colonel Majeskie locked the top of his desk back into place. He put everything back onto the desk within easy reach for General Rush. Very nervously, he invited the general to
sit down and then took his own seat behind the desk. He lit a cigar and offered the general one. To Colonel Majeskie's dismay, General Rush refused. Colonel Majeskie felt awkward smoking when the general wasn't. He fidgeted as he noticed the cigar sending out an obnoxious smoky haze that filled the room.

General Rush still hadn't spoken. He sat glaring at Colonel Majeskie.

Finally, Colonel Majeskie coughed and cleared his throat.

"Uh, what . . . what can I do for you, sir?" he asked uncomfortably, terrified of the possible answers.

General Rush stared straight into Colonel Majeskie's frightened eyes.

"How many men have you lost in the past four months, Majeskie?"

Colonel Majeskie bit down on his cigar. He bit so hard that the end fell into his lap. He jumped up and managed to stamp it out when it hit the floor.

General Rush never changed expressions.

"How many, Majeskie?"

"Uh," Colonel Majeskie began, looking around the room.

"Uh, that's . . . well, that's hard to say . . . exactly, I mean . . . ."

What Colonel Majeskie meant was that he had no idea how many men were in his brigade, much less how many weren't.
"You're the brigade commander," General Rush reminded him. "You have to sign all the paperwork on the dead ones. How many?"

"Well, actually, sir, I . . . uh . . . I've been pretty busy lately . . . you know, sir . . . a lot of paperwork and all . . . I . . . ." Colonel Majeskie stopped short, hoping he hadn't said what he thought he had said.

General Rush's eyes narrowed.

"Exactly, Majeskie. A lot of paperwork."

Colonel Majeskie stared hypnotically at the general, thinking of the time in the Fort Polk Officers Club when General Rush had gotten drunk and ordered all the lieutenants to strip and stand against the wall while he and the colonels threw olives at them. Colonel Majeskie feared General Rush more than he did any other human.

"Something has gone wrong with your brigade, Majeskie," General Rush went on. "You've lost more men in the past four months that all the rest of the division put together. All five battalion commanders, Majeskie, and damned good ones. Your men have lost the fighting instinct . . . and I can't blame them. Someone is going to have to rise up and inspire them. Do you know who that someone is?"

Colonel Majeskie knew exactly who that someone was.

"Who, sir?"

"You."

"Me, sir?"
Colonel Majeskie nodded mechanically. "North of here."

General Rush stopped and looked around.

"Where's your tactical map?"

Colonel Majeskie gazed around the room.

"It . . . uh . . . doesn't seem to be here, does it?"

"No, it doesn't," General Rush replied calmly. "Where the hell is it?"

Colonel Majeskie knew exactly where the map was. It was hanging on the wall in the back room, next to the colonel's bunk. But, for a very special reason, he knew he couldn't tell General Rush.

"Where is it, goddamnit?" General Rush roared.

"In the back room! In the back room!" Colonel Majeskie mopped the sweat from his forehead.

General Rush was already in the back room when Colonel Majeskie managed to drag himself there. The general seemed very interested in the map. He stood staring silently at it for several minutes. Colonel Majeskie stood behind him, wishing the chaplain were there.

Finally, General Rush pointed at the map with a puzzled look on his face.

"What . . . uh . . . those?"

Colonel Majeskie clenched his teeth.

"Darts, sir."

General Rush looked closer at the map.

"Yes, that's . . . that's what I thought they were."

He turned to Colonel Majeskie. "You spend your command time,
General Rush stood up and bellowed.

"Who the hell else, goddamnit! You're the brigade commander! Who did you think I meant . . . that goddamned mail clerk?"

Colonel Majeskie flinched and thought briefly of Specialist Four Nolan reading everyone's magazines in the latrine and then walking around tossing them randomly into open windows. No, he thought, there was nothing inspiring about Nolan.

General Rush was on his feet now, pacing back and forth.

"I have a mission for your brigade, Majeskie."

Colonel Majeskie groaned.

"One that will help you gain back the confidence of your men and let them gain back confidence in themselves."

He stopped and looked directly at Colonel Majeskie. "And I want you to direct the operation . . . personally." General Rush smiled and waited for a response.

There was none. Colonel Majeskie sat frozen. How long he had prepared himself for this moment! How often he had seen himself accepting the challenge bravely or as often wrapping himself around the general's leg, pleading for mercy. Now he could do neither. He couldn't move.

General Rush frowned and went back to his pacing.

"I have very classified intelligence that a considerable number of VC are holed up in a small village forty miles north of here."
your valuable command time, throwing darts at your map?"
He didn't wait for an answer. His voice got louder. "You
spend your goddamned valuable command time playing darts
with your tactical map?"

Colonel Majeskie was speechless. He didn't know how
to tell General Rush that the darts, in an informal way,
were very tactical. General Rush wouldn't like to think of
Colonel Majeskie lying in bed nights listening for the
Viet Cong slipping through the back window, not daring to
leave his bunk, lying there in the dark throwing darts at
the map to determine where to send his troops the next
morning. General Rush wouldn't understand all that. And
he wouldn't understand how easily the darts could fall out
and erase all record of the troop locations. Generals were
like that.

"Well, sir . . ." he began nervously.

"I am shocked and astounded, Majeskie."

General Rush shook his head and led Colonel Majeskie
back into the office. He stopped at the desk and picked up
a picture of Madeleine and the kids. He fingered it absent-
mindedly as he thought about the tactical map and the darts.

Colonel Majeskie watched the general fondling the pic-
ture. Forgive me, Madeleine, he thought sadly.

General Rush put the picture down.

"Majeskie, I want your men ready within twenty-four
hours."
Colonel Majeskie nodded dumbly.

"Don't bother to get up, Majeskie," General Rush said as he turned to go. "I know my way out."

Very commendable, Colonel Majeskie thought bitterly. It must be five feet to the door. He smiled weakly as the general turned around.

"Twenty-four hours, Majeskie."

Colonel Majeskie continued smiling until the general was gone, then stuck out his tongue at the general's back. But it didn't make him feel any better. Once, it would have, but no more. He laid his head down on the top of his desk. He could feel the cool steel against his cheek.

Maybe, he thought, if he irritated and goaded the sniper into shooting him through the back window... he could get out of the sheer torture of the operation. But Colonel Majeskie hoped the sniper was a good shot. He didn't want to suffer.

He wasn't sure that he would really go through with it until he found himself standing at the back window. The girls were back from lunch. They were giggling and already beginning to unbutton their shirts. Fearing that lust would beat his plan if he lingered, Colonel Majeskie screwed up his face into an awful contortion and stuck his thumbs in his ears. He waved his fingers and made vulgar noises at the hidden sniper.

The girls from the laundry saw him through the back window and came down to the drainage ditch to giggle and point.
Colonel Majeskie sat down, humiliated. He sighed and picked up the cigars. Surveying the desktop, he saw that nothing was missing. Colonel Majeskie thought it strange that nothing was gone. He opened the drawer to put the cigars back. Staring helplessly into the drawer, he almost broke down and cried -- the ebony and gold penholder was gone.

Colonel Majeskie threw the cigars across the room and beat his fists on the desk and stamped his feet. When his foot accidentally hit the trigger button under the desk, the top whanged up, and Colonel Majeskie, whose arms were on the desk, was thrown violently backward and landed on his back on the floor.

Lying stunned on the floor, Colonel Majeskie heard the native girls giggling in the laundry. He closed his eyes and thought of the time at Fort Gordon when, as a new second lieutenant, he had lasciviously cornered a cleaning girl in the BOQ corridor. She had cut his belt in two with her nail file, and his pants had fallen around his ankles. As he had stood staring at his bare legs, the girl had poured her bucket of cleaning water on the fallen pants. He remembered the way the water had felt.

Colonel Majeskie felt like that again.

When Spec Four Mike Johnson got to the Third Evacuation Hospital, the doctor looked at his feet and told him to take
two aspirins and rest. But he couldn't get the aspirins there -- he had to go back to his own dispensary for that.

"What can you do for me?" he had asked.

The doctor frowned. "You'll have to ask Major Spenser."

Major Spenser, the chief surgeon, was sick of seeing non-combat troops with non-combat injuries and illnesses. This was a war, and men were supposed to get wounded horribly and even killed. He had neither time nor sympathy for the lily-livered pseudo-soldiers who could only manage to get malaria or immersion-foot. He tried to discourage those men from leaving their jobs to waste his precious time and medicine. So he had stopped giving them aspirins, and he had had all the fungus antibiotics shipped to other hospitals. Then, when the men came to him limping on raw feet or shaking with malaria, he could honestly say he hadn't the supplies to treat them. It had worked well.

So what could he do for Johnson?

"Amputate."

Spec Four Johnson shrank back, horrified.

"Amputate? Look, doc, it's ... I mean ... it's only immersion foot."

"Then what are you doing at a hospital, if it's only immersion foot?"

"The captain sent me," Johnson told him.

"The captain is an alarmist," Major Spenser said flatly.

"Go back and take two aspirins."
Spec Pour Johnson saw his hopes for a rest slipping away. "Two aspirins for this?" He pointed to his raw, red feet, now dusty from having gone barefoot so long.

Major Spenser looked.

"All right," he said, annoyed. "Take the whole bottle, then. Take two bottles. But you'll have to go back to your own dispensary. This happens to be a combat evacuation hospital. We don't specialize in immersion foot and aspirins."

"But, sir," Spec Four Johnson pleaded, "you don't understand. My feet swell up at night, until I can't even walk. It's the night air. Captain Watson's afraid I'd be killed in a mortar attack."

Major Spenser eyed the soldier suspiciously. He couldn't recall ever having heard of such a thing. He concluded that it was a lie and that Johnson was a compulsive liar and a coward. He sneered. What did this liar take him for?

"They swell up at night, do they?"

"Yes, sir." Spec Four Johnson tried to look innocent and truthful. He was afraid to try too hard -- it might make him look retarded.

The man should be in a mental hospital, Major Spenser decided. But, still . . . suppose he was right? Major Spenser saw a chance for an article in the AMA Journal. He had already written several dozen, but each had been rejected by the editors, who passed them around from editor to editor simply for laughs. In the end, they always decided
that, although the author had a definite comic flair, their journal wasn't the place for comedy. They suggested he try the Reader's Digest. Major Spenser didn't even like the Reader's Digest and, in fact, sent all his copies to Colonel Majeskie every month, because Majeskie sent him so many wounded men to work on.

Major Spenser wanted someday to write a novel about a courageous surgeon in the Medical Corps, who had saved countless lives in Viet Nam with his timely amputations. This, he realized, could be another chapter. If the boy's feet really were swelling at night as he said . . . .

"All right, soldier," he said. "Go tell the nurse at the desk I said to admit you. Tell her you'll be in Ward Six."

Major Spenser watched the man leave, then went into his office to sharpen his scalpels and saws. It gave him great pleasure to sharpen them and shine them. Major Spenser took great pride in his tools -- they were his wife, his family, and his hobby. He loved them. He shaved with his scalpel every morning. He would chuckle as he shaved, thinking happily of a forthcoming amputation. No wonder he was such a damned good surgeon, he would decide as he shaved -- he could sharpen scalpels and saws faster than a machine could. He often thought of John Henry's contest with the steel-driving machine and wished he could pit himself against a sharpening machine, just to prove to the world how skilled a surgeon he was. He had thought for a
long time that his scalpels were sharp enough to shave his reflection off the mirror. But, when he tried it, he just got shaving cream all over the mirror and had to clean it off. He chuckled every time he thought about it. They were sharp, though, probably as sharp as any in Viet Nam. Even sharper.

He held his favorite saw in one hand and a scalpel in the other and wondered how they would feel biting into Johnson's ankle. The thought made him smile.

Specialist Fourth Class Johnson lay in his hospital bed that night running his hands over the crisp white sheets. He thought about Rucker and Ward and Harris in FDC, listening to pompous colonels and jittery lieutenants on the radio giving orders all day. He wanted to laugh aloud at the poor slobs who were, at that very moment, sitting up to their asses in muddy paddywater. In fact, he did laugh, but the man next to him told him to shut up or he'd end up in a strait-jacket. Mike didn't laugh again.

But he was happy. He could see himself passing several carefree weeks in this serene white world. He yawned and drifted easily into sleep.

A noise at the foot of his bed awakened him a short time later. As his eyes focused, Spec Four Johnson could see a tiny pinpoint of light shining on his feet, which were protruding awkwardly from under the folded-back sheet. He sat up, startled.
"What the hell are you doing?"
A voice came firmly, and a little indignantly, out of the dark that surrounded the little light.
"Sir."
"What? I asked you what the hell you were doing."
Spec Pour Johnson could make out a figure in the dark.
"What the hell am I doing, SIR," the figure said sternly.
As Spec Pour Johnson's eyes adjusted to the dark, he recognized the figure holding the flashlight as Major Spenser, the surgeon.
"What the hell are you doing . . . sir?" he asked hesitantly.
"I'm checking your feet."
He straightened up and frowned.
"They're not swollen." Disappointment flooded his voice. Spec Pour Johnson was suddenly seized by a terrible fear. The major was checking his feet to see if the night air really did make them swell. He realized the major would easily see that it didn't and would turn him out of the clean white hospital bed to go back to the boredom, the dirty boredom of the war. He thought quickly.
"They will, sir. What time is it?"
Major Spenser looked at his watch under the flashlight beam.
"Two - ten."
"Oh . . . well, that explains it."
Major Spenser eyed Johnson suspiciously. He was angry, anyway, because he saw his AMA Journal article vanishing before a single royalty had been paid, before a single word had been written. He suspected Johnson was trying to con him and wondered if the bastard was starting to feel sorry for him. He hated condescension in enlisted men.

Spec Four Johnson explained, "It's only after three that they swell."

Major Spenser tried to see the man's face in the dark. He shined his light in Johnson's eyes. He didn't believe what Johnson had said, but could he afford not to take the chance and wait? A glimmer of hope still shone faintly in his mind. It wasn't the money from the article he wanted so much as the recognition. He knew he was the best surgeon in Viet Nam. His long record of successful amputations proved it beyond a doubt. And if this man's feet really did swell after three, and if it were discovered in time, Major Spenser felt he could amputate and save both the boy's life and his AMA article. It was strange to think of fungus-infected feet swelling on schedule. It made Major Spenser's heart pound with excitement. He would have the severed feet bronzed and put on his desk as paperweights, twin testaments to his undeniable skill as an army surgeon.

"I'll be back at three-fifteen," he told Johnson. He rose and shined his light in Johnson's face. "I want to see some swelling when I come back."
"Yes, sir," Johnson said weakly.

Lying awake after Major Spenser had left, Spec Four
Johnson wondered if his feet would really swell. They never
had before, but maybe ... just maybe ... this time they
would. They had to! He thought about the minute-by-minute
hours in FDC, the long war-haunted days of nothing to do but
talk to disembodied voices on the radio and tack up paper
dolls that meant nothing. He heard the raspy breathing of
the man next to him. If it was malaria the man had, maybe ... but there was no time -- he couldn't become infected in only an
hour.

At three o'clock, the swelling still hadn't started.
Johnson looked at his watch and shuddered. He felt the sweat
begin to trickle inside his clothes and on his face. He
stared at his feet and concentrated with all his might. He
wiggled his toes furiously to pump blood into the feet. Oh
God, he thought, I don't want to go back to the battery!
I'll go crazy there! He looked at his feet and reached down
to feel them. Nothing. Just plain, ordinary, scaly feet.

Suddenly, he heard footsteps. Major Spenser! Spec Four
Johnson was frantic. As the footsteps left the hall and
clicked into the ward, Johnson could see the tiny flash-
light beaming in the dark. He gritted his teeth and lifted
his feet as high as he could into the air. The flashlight
came closer. Spec Four Johnson closed his eyes and brought
his feet down as hard as he could on the metal end-railing
of the bed. The whole ward seemed to turn bright orange. Suddenly, it all faded to yellow. The pain dimmed to an agonizing yellow ache that pulsed through the very bones of his feet. Spec Four Johnson felt the tears rolling in rivers down his cheeks. But he felt also a smile forming, as he sensed the terrible throbbing and swelling in his feet.

Major Spenser reached the bed and immediately pulled up the sheets and shined the light on Johnson's feet. He drew back with a gasp and looked at Johnson.

"My God," he muttered, "My God. They're swollen."

He shined the light on Johnson's face and saw the tears glistening there. His own eyes blurred as he thought of the painful, swollen nights the boy must have suffered.

"I'm sorry I doubted you, son," he said tenderly. "We'll . . . we'll get you . . . fixed up." Major Spenser turned quickly and left, afraid that his voice would break at any moment. He felt, for the first time in years, like crying, like actually lying on the floor and kicking his feet and crying. Even the most seriously wounded of his patients had never roused him out of his clinical frame of mind. Now, it all flooded over him at once, the whole miraculous scope of the good he had been doing, the lives he had saved, the happiness he had wrought.

In the hall, Major Spenser was weak with joy. He wiped his eyes on his sleeve. Oh, how rare was the destiny that allowed a man personal success through humanitarianism! He felt in that golden moment a close, an intimate, relationship
with Madame Curie and Albert Schweitzer and Dwight Eisenhower. Oh, the brotherhood of healing! Major Spenser was glad that he hadn't let his mother persuade him to follow in the family trade, to become a simple carpenter. How foolish it would have been!

Major Spenser went right to his office, overcome with emotion, unable to think of sleeping. Sitting at his desk, he spent the long hours till dawn sharpening his saws.

Lieutenant James Joyce Stillman was sitting in the small "A" Battery library. It had been built by the artillery and by the infantry company stationed there, to give the men something to do for recreation between operations. Most of the men, however, preferred to sit in the barracks drinking beer, so the library was often empty. Except for Lieutenant Stillman. He stayed in the library as much as he possibly could.

He did so partly because he hated Captain Watson, the battery commander, and partly because of his name -- he hated it. It irritated and embarrassed him to go to the Officers Club and have himself introduced by his full name. He generally got a look of surprise from the other officers. And there was always someone who knew his name and felt compelled to broadcast it. Like Lieutenant Galtry, who took wagers that no one could guess Lieutenant Stillman's middle name and always told everyone after they quit guessing. Sonofabitch, Lieutenant Stillman thought bitterly.
The name had been given to him by his father, an English teacher at Berkeley. It was embarrassing enough when the men found out his father was an English teacher, but it was utter humiliation to have them find out his middle name. A girl's name. James Joyce Stillman. How could he be a leader with a name like that? A goddamned girl's name. He hated his father almost as much as he hated Captain Watson and twice as much as he hated Lieutenant Galtry, whom he hated a great deal.

In the library, silence was the rule. So Lieutenant Stillman stayed in the library, where no one could say a word about his name. Everywhere he had gone in the army, some nosy clerk had checked the records and found out his name, and from then on Lieutenant Stillman was kidded unmercifully. So he stayed in the library.

The only time he didn't hate his name was when he forgot about it. And the only time he forgot about it was on an operation in the field. As an artillery forward observer, Lieutenant Stillman was kept busy on operations, calling in artillery whenever the infantry got in trouble. And Colonel Majeskie's infantry was constantly in trouble.

But Captain Watson envied Lieutenant Stillman and refused to let him go out anymore. Lieutenant Stillman raved and cursed everytime he was turned down for an operation and ended up going to the library, where he would brood bitterly over his name and whet his sharp hatred of Captain Watson.
In the field, Lieutenant Stillman did everything Captain Watson dreamed of doing. He devoted himself so single-mindedly to doing his job, and forgetting his name, that he had run up the best killing record in the division. He was an absolute terror with his artillery, never hesitating to call in the great guns on any and every suspicious-looking village. The infantry captains loved him. They literally had fistfights over who would get Lieutenant Stillman for an operation. He never failed to bring home an astounding body count of men, women, children, and livestock. He was not bloodthirsty, but it was only in his work that Lieutenant Stillman found blessed forgetfulness and could lay down for a time the awful burden he was forced to haul through life. So he did his work well.

When he heard of the new operation, Lieutenant Stillman raced back to the battery area. All the men were busy cleaning their 105 howitzers, breaking shells out of the boxes and lining them up, screwing fuzes onto them for firing.

He passed all this without a glance and went straight to Captain Watson's office.

Captain Watson had been cheered somewhat by the news of the operation. It gave him a chance to draw circles and mystical military numbers on his map. The map was covered with clear acetate, so that the various operations could be marked in grease pencil and then wiped off again. Captain Watson really had no other link with the actions of the
infantry, and it chafed him to think that a green lieutenant like Stillman should be allowed to grab all the glory . . . and from right under his nose, too. His only consolation was that he had the power to keep Stillman out of the field. And he didn't hesitate to use it.

The other forward observer, Lieutenant St. James, was a bumbler who had lost most of his radio operators in battles and accidents. He was nothing to be envied, so Captain Watson didn't mind letting him go out. It was Stillman who chafed him severely.

So Captain Watson drew on his map and then erased it, drew and erased, operation after operation, smiling only when he thought of Lieutenant Stillman sitting ingloriously in the library. When he wasn't drawing circles on his map, Captain Watson sat at his desk and drew circles on his calendar, counting off the days he had still to sit in his crummy office, missing this crummy war.

Lieutenant Stillman hated Captain Watson, but he knew he had to hide his hatred whenever an operation was scheduled. Of course, it never did any good, but Lieutenant Stillman kept trying. He had to. He hated sitting in the library and thinking about his name. He hated it almost as badly as he hated Captain Watson for making him have to go there.

When he burst into Captain Watson's office, he found the captain busily scribbling on his wall map. The captain
was too intent on his work to notice Lieutenant Stillman, who walked quietly up behind him and watched him sketch the circles. Drawing in his breath, Lieutenant Stillman made a concentrated effort to be polite.

"What does that one mean, sir?"

Captain Watson didn't bother looking around. He knew who it was. He knew Lieutenant Stillman would hang around bothering him, pleading to go on the operation and grab more glory for himself.

"Nothing," he said flatly.

Lieutenant Stillman watched quietly as Captain Watson drew another circle. He decided to try again.

"That's a nice one there, sir." He reached forward to point. His finger rubbed the little circle into a smear.

Captain Watson stared at the smudge. It had been a damned nice circle. His face burned. The sonofabitch couldn't even let him have his circles. He turned around angrily.

"Do you think I draw circles on my map because I like to, Lieutenant?"

Lieutenant Stillman didn't really think drawing circles would be much fun and said so.

"Well, let me tell you one thing," Captain Watson continued, pointing his finger meaningfully at the lieutenant. "This isn't a game with me, Stillman. I'm not just trying to draw pretty pictures . . . ."

Lieutenant Stillman looked at the map and agreed that the captain certainly wasn't doing that.
"It is deadly serious, Stillman," Captain Watson went on. "Deadly serious. You think just because you go out in the field . . . ."

"Can I?" Lieutenant Stillman broke in excitedly.

"No."

Lieutenant Stillman frowned as the captain continued his speech. "You think just because you go out in the field and call in my artillery — my artillery — that yours is the only job worth doing. Well, it's not. It's not, because every shell that sails out of one of these guns bears my personal mark of guidance."

Lieutenant Stillman was about to ask if he could go out on the operation, when Captain Watson raised his hand for silence.

"My job is the indispensable one, Stillman. Any one of a thousand ordinary men could do your job. It takes a special breed to be a commander."

He stopped and went to his desk and sat down. He smiled at Lieutenant Stillman. "And you still can't go."

Lieutenant Stillman felt like strangling the captain. His hands itched.

"Why not?" he managed to say.

"You've been working too hard. You need a rest."

"I've been sitting in the library for a month, sir."

"Oh ho! And now you pop in here and announce you're ready to go out on an operation. Just like that."
Lieutenant Stillman struggled to keep his hands from leaping onto the captain's throat.

"You've kept me out of the field yourself, sir."

Captain Watson looked at a magazine on his desk.

"You needed a rest. Besides," he smiled, "Lieutenant St. James is going out."

Lieutenant Stillman was shocked. St. James had been in the field as an observer more than seven months, the average time being only four or five.

"But... sir..." he protested.

Captain Watson raised his hand.

"No buts, Lieutenant. Lieutenant St. James is more experienced than you, and this operation calls for experience."

"But how the hell do I get more experience if I never get to go out?"

Captain Watson smiled.

"I don't see how you possibly could."

Lieutenant Stillman stalked out, burning with hatred.

Captain Watson smiled and went back to drawing circles on his map. He drew a face on one of them and chuckled. Then he rubbed it out and got down to business again.

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher, the brigade chaplain, was grateful for the operation. He packed his field gear happily and thanked the Lord for showing him the way. Actually, he had never really been fond of going on operations before,
fearing as he did that he might be killed. Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher saw no way he could properly serve the Lord dead, unless he were transported gloriously into heaven, where he was sure he would become one of God's trusted lieutenants, which would be eminently more honorable than being classified as an army captain, which was the rank he assumed automatically in the army. The chaplain wouldn't mind taking a cut in rank if it meant directly serving God, who he felt would be a much better general to him than Colonel Majeskie was now. Still, Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher had never been eager to give up life and ascend into the spirit. He sweated a little each time he thought of it and ended up by trying to explain to God that he had so much work to do here on earth . . . .

But now the chaplain was eagerly preparing for the operation. For Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher had committed a grave sin. He shuddered every time he thought of it. The operation was a test, a way to redeem himself in God's eyes. Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher wasn't certain how God planned to use him on the operation, but he knew when he heard it was scheduled that the operation was meant personally as a test, mapped out by God himself.

The chaplain thought of his sin and shuddered. He buried his face in the underwear he was packing. He had committed a most grave sin.

Or, at least he thought he had. The men had said he did.

It had occurred, or allegedly occurred, two weeks earlier when he had accompanied Corporal Mahew and PFC Briggs to
Saigon. The men were going for a good time, and Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher went along to buy some silk for his wife. He wasn't accustomed to going to Saigon, but the men had insisted he come with them.

"Look at it this way, Chaplain," Corporal Mahew had said, "if you don't go with us, that's as much as sayin' we ain't worthy. And if we ain't worthy in your eyes, how are we gonna look to the Almighty?"

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher had enjoyed the ride to Saigon. Corporal Mahew drove and insisted the Chaplain sit up front with him. Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher had basked in the bright afternoon sun and thanked God for the fine rapport he had with the men.

The chaplain had bought his wife's silk and had gone to look for the two enlisted men. He saw them, at last, drinking beer in a dingy little bar. Two dark girls with bright red mouths flitted around them, giggling. He had hesitated about going in. But Corporal Mahew had seen him and yelled for him to come on in. Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher hadn't wanted to go, but he didn't want to jeopardize his rapport with the men by insinuating they were unworthy. Hoping God had turned his head for a moment, the chaplain had gone in.

That was the last thing he could remember about the night.

He had awakened the next morning with a terrible headache. Looking around in alarm, he realized he was in a
cheap little hotel room. Trying to piece together the night before, he had lain awake perhaps five minutes when the door banged open and one of the bright-mouthed bar girls walked in and stuck her hand out. She saw the chaplain's amazed expression and pointed to her hand, volubly demanding five-hundred piasters.

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher had gasped. He pulled back the covers to get out of bed and saw that he was stark naked. Bewildered and embarrassed, he had pulled the covers quickly up to his neck. He lay and watched, horrified, as the girl ranted and stamped at the foot of his bed.

"You boom-boom, you pay!" she demanded, pointing at her hand. "Five-hundred P., GI!"

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher had closed his eyes to pray when Corporal Mahew and PFC Briggs wandered into the room. The girl saw them and began jabbering loudly at them.

"He boom-boom, he pay! He cheap charlie, goddamn!"
The men winked at the chaplain. Corporal Mahew grinned. The chaplain sputtered wildly.

"I didn't! I swear! I . . . ."

Corporal Mahew raised his hand, grinning.

"Are you sure, Chaplain?"

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher stared at Mahew. He tried to answer, but nothing came out. He could, in fact, remember nothing after he had entered the bar. He closed his eyes and tried to remember. His head hurt terribly. Oh, my God, he prayed . . . .
"Well," Corporal Mahew said finally, "why don't you just pay up, and let's go."

"But . . . but . . ." the chaplain protested.

Corporal Mahew held up his watch.

"Now, chaplain, there's gonna be hell to pay if we don't get out a here. It's eight-twenty."

Hell to pay, the chaplain thought miserably. He groaned audibly. With a sermon to preach at nine . . . but how could he? What could he say? He groaned again.

On Corporal Mahew's insistence, Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher agreed finally to pay the girl. He discovered he had no money and had to give her the silk he had bought for his wife, doubling the magnitude of his sin.

"C'mon, chaplain," Mahew had said, pulling him out the door. "The sheep are waitin'."

Jokes, the chaplain thought sadly. Jokes at a time when his very soul hung in the balance, dangled by a thread over eternal hellfire. Hell to pay, he thought. Oh, Lord, had he really . . . ? Had he . . . ?

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher had looked back anxiously at the bed. Two pillows. He had groaned. Of course, he was a restless sleeper, and he could have used both pillows . . . and both sides of the bed. Oh Lord, he had prayed, oh Lord tell me what to do.

Not a word was spoken until the jeep pulled into the brigade headquarters. Corporal Mahew had turned around and grinned at the pale, sweating chaplain.
"What's the sermon today, chaplain? Temptations of the flesh?"

Luckily for the chaplain, when he reached the chapel a half-hour late, the men had already turned off the lights and set up the projector and were showing "Bonnie and Clyde" for the fourth time that week. Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher had been relieved, and reprieved.

He had gone to his bunk and lay there for two weeks praying. Then the Lord had scheduled the operation, and the chaplain had his sign.

So now Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher looked forward to the operation with the same sort of zeal he supposed Jesus must have felt thinking of the cross. He was grateful for a chance to redeem himself in God's eyes, but at the same time he wondered how God's will would be carried out.

Trust in the Lord, he thought as he packed his Bible and smiled weakly. What would the Lord demand for such a sin?

Lieutenant St. James threw his compass against the wall of his room. The glass front on it broke, and the little blue needle jiggled nervously on the floor. Lieutenant St. James lay back on his bunk and stared at the ceiling. Another goddamned operation.

Lieutenant St. James had been with the infantry for more than seven months. He knew that he should have had a
job back at the battery long ago. But Captain Watson left him out there.

Things had gone all right for the first four months or so, but sometime during the fifth month, Lieutenant St. James had realized that people were actually shooting at him. It had happened when Rodriguez, his radio operator, had been killed by a bullet meant for Lieutenant St. James. Cradling Rodriguez's bloody head in his lap, waiting for a Medivac chopper, Lieutenant St. James had suddenly begun staring into the distant woodline, realizing for the first time that somebody was after him.

From that time on, operations had scared the daylights out of Lieutenant St. James. He actually got sick everytime he heard of a new operation and couldn't eat for a week before or after. And lately, there had been the dreams.

In his dreams, Lieutenant St. James would be sitting behind a paddy dike when suddenly on the dike would appear his radio men, marching by him, mangled and bloody. Always the last in the parade was Rodriguez, the dead one, who would shake his bleeding head and point an accusing finger at the lieutenant. Then they would all turn in unison and stare at him with sorrowful eyes. Why me? they would ask.

Lieutenant St. James would wake up sweating and often crying. Had he really sent those men to the hospital? And Rodriguez to his grave? Oh, Good Lord! No! he thought. No! It's a war! Those things happen! The mines, the booby traps, the snipers! It wasn't his fault!
But still the men paraded, five, six, seven, eight, night after night, and Lieutenant St. James grew more and more confused and more and more afraid to go out in the field. He prayed that Captain Watson would take him back to the battery and let him work in FDC. He couldn't stand much more.

It had all started, in fact, when Lieutenant St. James had refused to work in the FDC. As a forward observer, he had felt his obligation fulfilled when he came back each time from an operation, tired and hungry and dirty. But Captain Watson had insisted he use his free time back at the battery, working in FDC. Lieutenant St. James had been shocked. He knew other forward observers didn't have to do that. He also knew there was an officer assigned to FDC who didn't have to go out in the field. It hadn't made much sense to Lieutenant St. James, and he refused to do it. Finally one day, Captain Watson ordered him to work in the FDC, and Lieutenant St. James felt it was time for a showdown.

"Why should I work in the FDC?"

"Because you're an artillery officer assigned to my battery," Captain Watson had told him bluntly.

"But I'm a forward observer," he had protested.

"That doesn't take up all your time, Lieutenant. You owe a bit of your time and allegiance to the battery, don't you think?"

No, Lieutenant St. James had told him. No, he didn't think so, and he had tried to explain the unfairness of his
working at the battery when Lieutenant Morrison, who ran FDC, never had to go out with the infantry.

"Of course he doesn't," Captain Watson had explained patiently. "Lieutenant Morrison is the FDC officer."

"And I'm the forward observer."

"Only part of the time," Captain Watson had reminded him. "Lieutenant Morrison is FDC officer all the time."

Then why in God's name did they need him in FDC, if Lieutenant Morrison was there? Lieutenant St. James had asked angrily.

"To give Lieutenant Morrison a rest."

"What about me?" Lieutenant St. James had demanded. "When do I get a rest?"

"When you're in FDC. It's not a tiring job," Captain Watson had said.

Lieutenant St. James had felt his head begin to spin.

"Then why the hell does Morrison need a rest?"

"Any job is tiring is you do it all the time. Even FDC. But, as you will only be doing it part of the time, it won't be so tiring."

Lieutenant St. James had leaped angrily to his feet. Did Captain Watson think field operations were restful?

"You only do that part-time, too. When you finish an operation, then you can work in FDC part-time. That way, neither job will be tiring, and Lieutenant Morrison can get a rest."
So, Lieutenant St. James had refused to work in the FDC during his time off from operations. And Captain Watson had shrugged and left him with the infantry.

Lieutenant St. James had endured it for six months, but after the dreams started, he came one day into Captain Watson's office. "Why can't I come back to the battery and take Morrison's place in FDC?"

Captain Watson had regarded him unemotionally. "You don't have the experience to work in FDC. And Lieutenant Morrison certainly doesn't have the field experience to replace you."

"What about the new man, Galtry?" Lieutenant St. James had pressed on. "He could take my place."

"Galtry?" Captain Watson had seemed mildly shocked. "Why, no. No, Larry doesn't have the experience to do either job. He certainly couldn't take your place."

"Larry," Lieutenant St. James had muttered. An old fraternity brother of Captain Watson, a pledge when Watson had been a senior. Now they drank together in the club at night and called each other by their first names.

"Why not send the sonofabitch out on an operation and give him some experience?" Lieutenant St. James had asked innocently.

Captain Watson had glared at him.

"Because, Lieutenant, that would put you out of a job. Because you don't have the experience to take over FDC. And even if you did, that would put Lieutenant Morrison out of
a job. He doesn't have any more field experience than Larry."

Then the captain had started drawing circles on his map, ending the conversation.

So now Lieutenant St. James was mad and scared all the time. He stopped looking at the ceiling and looked around his tiny room. It was unbelievably cluttered, strewn with boots and broken compasses and old cans of shaving cream and dozens of other things he had hurled viciously at the wall before operations.

And not only was Lieutenant St. James angry at being left in the field so long, and scared of dying, and guilty when he thought of his RTO's -- he was also the loneliest man in the battery. Lieutenant St. James was the most unpopular man in the battery, too. And because no one liked him, he was forced to sit in his room and brood over his guilt and his own impending death and his unanimous unpopularity.

Lieutenant St. James was not really a despicable person. His unpopularity had nothing to do with his personality. Most of the officers and men in the battery liked him well enough as a person -- but they were scared senseless of him as a forward observer.

The officers were scared because they were afraid they might someday have to take his place in the field. The enlisted men didn't like him, and greatly feared him, because he had lost so many radio operators. Each man in the
battery felt himself a potential replacement for the lieutenant's lost men. They dreaded seeing Lieutenant St. James slogging muddily down the road to the battery area after operations. Sick call was flooded on those days. Men kicked howitzers and banged their heads on walls and cut veins and stuck their hands on hot gun tubes -- anything to keep from being picked as Lieutenant St. James's next radio man.

Lieutenant St. James knew it wasn't his fault. How could he be to blame for Colonel Majeskie's insane operations that left them all stranded time after time in ambushes? But the men in the battery only understood that Lieutenant St. James had walked into many a rice paddy with many a radio man and had walked out alone each time.

He was a jinx. A common punishment in the battery was a day in the field with Lieutenant St. James. The threat kept the men angelic and gave the battery area almost a ghostly aura. There was no shouting or drunkenness or gambling or whoring or even loud talking. All the men did their work quietly and then ran to hide in their rooms. Some even spent their time off reading in the library with Lieutenant Stillman, certain that no one would be so rude as to drag a man out of the library. They were a model battery, and the credit lay heavily and unwanted with Lieutenant St. James. Other forward observers, in other batteries, got not only a radio operator but a recon sergeant who acted as assistant forward observer; Lieutenant
St. James was lucky to find a single well man to carry his radio.

He looked around the room sadly. As always, his gaze fell on the memorial shelf. On it were mementoes of his fallen RTO's: Johnson's shattered watch, Belinski's leaky canteen, Henning's broken bi-focals, Acker's blood-stained T-shirt, Rodriguez's ripped and bloody helmet, and on and on until his eyes dropped inevitably to the floor. There on the floor, under the shelf, were Danford's boots. Danford had been the last. He had stepped on a small mine.

Or rather, he had jumped on a small mine. Right out of the chopper and onto a mine that had literally blown his feet out from under him. The medics had somehow salvaged one mangled, toeless foot, but the other was strewn in red ribbons all over the paddy. Little pieces of it had hung all day from the green, grassy rice plants that poked out of the water.

Lieutenant St. James had held the boy's head in his own lap, just as he did each time, while the medics had cut the boots off. Danford had moaned pitifully until the morphine took effect and made him forget momentarily his ruined feet. Lieutenant St. James had broken down and cried when he had seen the bloody stumps of Danford's feet. One after another, he had thought, one after another they had dropped, like flies, innocent and mutilated.

Thinking angrily and sadly and guiltily of Danford, Lieutenant St. James grabbed the torn boots and marched into
Captain Watson's office. He dropped them right in the middle of Captain Watson's desk.

"Fill 'em up."

Captain Watson looked up, surprised and irritated.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded, staring disgustedly at the boots.

Lieutenant St. James was suddenly furious.

"You want me to go out?" he screamed, his eyes filling with hot tears. "You want me to go out on this goddamned operation? Well, these were Danford's. I need a refill!"

Captain Watson looked long and hard at the seething lieutenant. Why must they seethe so much? he wondered.

"You really feel sorry for yourself, don't you?"

Lieutenant St. James was shocked.

"Sorry for myself?"

"You think you have it tough, don't you?" Captain Watson continued. "Well, you're lucky. Think of Danford and Rodriguez and all the others."

Lieutenant St. James couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"Think of them? My God, I think of them day and night!"

"Well, I should think you would, St. James." Captain Watson shook his head slowly. "And now you want another one."

"I . . . I what?" Lieutenant St. James was bewildered.

Captain Watson looked up.

"A commander," he said, "a commander is more than a leader of his men, St. James. He's a father. And a mother."
It hurts every time he loses one of his boys." He fixed
the lieutenant with a cold stare. "You've taken eight of
my boys, Lieutenant. And now you want to take another one."

Lieutenant St. James felt dizzy. The world was upside
down.

"I didn't kill those men!"

"Someone did," Captain Watson replied.

"The Viet Cong did!" Lieutenant St. James was in tears.

"And now you want to send another one out to die."

"You're sending me out to die!"

"You're experienced. You can take care of yourself."

"Those other radio men weren't experienced!"

Captain Watson shook his head sadly.

"No . . . and see what happened to them."

Lieutenant St. James hardly knew what was happening.

His guilt had always been a private thing, only a suspicion,
not a real fact. Now the captain had set it in concrete.

"My God, Captain," he pleaded. "I . . . I . . . ."

"Will that be all, Lieutenant?" Captain Watson was tired
and he had circles to draw. "Try to think of someone besides
yourself for a change."

Lieutenant St. James went back to his bunk and lay down.
He closed his eyes and tried to think of someone besides him-
self. But always himself loomed up, pitiful and shaking
with grief and guilt. He opened his eyes and looked at the
memorial shelf. He tried to think of his radio men, but
now their faces were blurred and lost in the shadow of himself. He turned his face to the wall and cried.

The operation called for encirclement by four infantry companies of a small village called Rong Song. The four companies would come from Colonel Majeskie's Third Brigade, and Colonel Majeskie would fly overhead in a helicopter and direct the battle. Captain Watson's "A" Battery would fire direct support artillery for the operation.

Colonel Majeskie went into the supply room to draw his field gear. He had never bothered collecting it before, as he had never had any use for it.

Corporal Hanes was the only man working in supply. Colonel Majeskie frowned. He hated dealing with enlisted men.

"I need some field gear," he said sharply.

Corporal Hanes sat with his feet on the counter, reading a copy of Ebony. He looked up coldly at Colonel Majeskie. He had been reading an article about the black rebellion at home and of his brothers being massacred by policemen on campuses and even asleep in their homes. This irritated Corporal Hanes, and he had been watching all day to see if he could detect any prejudice in the battery area. He particularly scrutinized the officers, whom he suspected were persecuting him relentlessly. He sat in his T-shirt with the fan blowing on him and watched Colonel Majeskie
like a hunting dog, watching for a single trace of prejudice to flutter out.

"How much?" he asked while he waited.

It rankled Colonel Majeskie when the enlisted men failed to call him "sir." Each sentence not ending in "sir" seemed to be left repulsively dangling.

"Sir," he said sternly, finishing Hanes's dangling sentence.

"You don't have to call me 'sir', Colonel," Corporal Hanes said, wondering if the Colonel was trying to cover up his prejudice with flattery. "I'm only a corporal."

"I was calling myself that," Colonel Majeskie said, broadly implying that Corporal Hanes should do the same.

This struck Corporal Hanes as the most pompous thing he'd ever heard from any officer, black or white. To have to call yourself "sir" -- whew!

"Whew!" he said, amazed. "You oughta lighten up on yourself, Colonel!"

Colonel Majeskie realized he was on the verge of quarrelling with an enlisted man. The thought rankled him.

"Just give me some field gear," he said quickly.

"How much?"

"Whatever it takes." Colonel Majeskie was getting angry. "I'm going on an operation. Just give me what the other officers carry."

"Which officer?"

"Any officer!"
Corporal Hanes scratched his head.

"Well, now, they all carry different things, Colonel. Lieutenant Jansen, he used to carry a picture of his girl . . . ."

Colonel Majeskie tried to stay calm. He gritted his teeth.

"I don't want a picture of Lieutenant Jansen's girl . . . ."

"He wouldn't let you have it anyway. Besides, he went home last month. But, I'll tell you one thing, Colonel -- she was a looker. Hoo-boy!" He closed his eyes and thought of Lieutenant Jansen's girlfriend.

It irked Colonel Majeskie that he had no idea what field gear he would need. He hit suddenly upon an idea.

"Look, corporal," he said. "Just imagine that you were going on an operation. Think of what you'd take. Then pack it up and send it to my office this afternoon."

"Sure thing, Colonel."

Colonel Majeskie left hurriedly. Corporal Hanes stared after him. Suddenly he realized that he had completely forgotten to notice whether Colonel Majeskie had been prejudiced or not.

"Crap," he said and went back to reading his magazine.

When Lieutenant St. James regained some sense of composure, he was burdened down heavily with guilt and still ravaged by his hatred of the captain. But the guilt rose like a body to the top of his mind and polluted his thoughts, until all he could think of was himself as murderer and sadist.
Had he really been responsible for the bullets and mines that had struck down his radio men? They wouldn't have been in the field, he reasoned sadly, had it not been for him. They would be sitting in the battery even now, safely waiting out the war. The captain's cruel words settled in his mind. Yes, he was guilty . . . but what could he do?

He went to find the chaplain. He found Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher packing his gear.

"Chaplain, I need to talk to you."

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher looked up. He hoped it wasn't a confession -- he didn't feel worthy to hear it.

"I have a confession to make," Lieutenant St. James said.

The chaplain continued packing, hoping the lieutenant would leave.

"Chaplain, I've sinned," Lieutenant St. James went on.

"At least I think I have."

The chaplain looked up. He, too, had sinned, or at least he thought he had.

"You think?"

"I don't know for sure. Everything is so confused."

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher sat down on his bunk.

"Sit down, son." He motioned for Lieutenant St. James to sit beside him, but the lieutenant shook his head.

"I think I've committed a horrible sin, chaplain," he said.
The chaplain smiled paternally. If only you knew, he thought, the guilt I must carry. "Tell me, son," he said, "I'll understand."

"I think I'm a murderer, chaplain."

"The chaplain gasped."

"My God!"

"I knew you wouldn't understand," Lieutenant St. James moaned. "No one can understand."

Chaplain Beaumont-Bletcher sat very still, hoping the man might yet leave. He didn't. Instead, he continued his confession.

"I think I killed one. The others were only mutilated."

My Lord, the chaplain thought, terrified. He glanced quickly at the door to determine whether he could make it. He tried to stall as he edged along the bunk toward the door.

"Uh . . . why, Lieutenant? I mean, why did you . . . uh . . . kill . . . or . . . er . . . mutilate all those men?" He thought of Jack the Ripper and edged farther down the bunk.

"I mutilated seven . . . one died right off. At least . . . at least, I think I did." The guilt still stuck in his mind in a huge, shapeless blob, indefinable, uncertain. He needed answers.

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher thought of his own sin. He couldn't speak of it, even to himself. And here was this man standing before him enumerating murders and mutilations
he had committed, or thought he had committed. How could he not know if he'd killed and mutilated? The chaplain kept his eye on the door as he inched along the bunk. The lieutenant was paranoid, he decided, and dangerous.

"It's making me paranoid, chaplain. It really is."

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher kept nodding sympathetically as he lifted himself gradually off the bunk, preparing his rush to the door.

Suddenly, Lieutenant St. James sprang at him and grabbed his shoulders. His eyes were red and wild.

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher fell back on the bunk, praying for a painless death.

"Chaplain," Lieutenant St. James moaned, falling on his knees by the bed. "Chaplain... you've got to help me."

The chaplain swallowed loudly and nodded.

Slowly getting to his feet, Lieutenant St. James went on talking, trying to calm himself.

"I've got to prove that it's not me. I've got to make them believe it wasn't me who killed those men. I've got to make myself believe it."

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher spoke, his voice quivering.

"Wh-wh-wh-who do you think killed them?"

Lieutenant St. James looked down at the chaplain.

"God."

The chaplain fell back on the bunk. He felt he was fainting. "God?" he whispered. "Oh, no, no, no."
"Yes! Yes, God did it! Chaplain, it was their time to go. God took them to heaven!"

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher heard the lieutenant's voice somewhere far off, as in a dense fog. He tried not to listen.

"God killed those men, Chaplain. Maybe not maliciously. It was just their time. But He did it — I was just there. I wasn't an accomplice. I didn't want them to be killed or wounded. I liked those men." Lieutenant St. James sat down on the floor by the bunk and buried his head in his hands. "I liked them . . . I really did."

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher sat up slowly. He looked a long time at the sobbing man. Something in the lieutenant's voice had touched him, some lost note of misery and guilt. He was like a little child, confused and blaming his God for his sorrows and sins. The chaplain's fear began to subside. Perhaps the lieutenant had been a murderer, but now he was just a scared little boy, a lost sheep baaa-ing for help. Well, he thought reverently, go ahead and blame God, my son -- he won't mind. God has taken the blame for centuries. He looked tenderly at the lieutenant, crumpled on the floor. He reached down and touched him softly on the arm.

"I believe you, son," he said tenderly.

Lieutenant St. James looked up though red-rimmed eyes. Tears rolled down his cheeks. He put his head against the chaplain's knee.
Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher felt himself on the verge of tears.

"Now, now, son," he said, patting the lieutenant's head. "It's all right. God understands." He understood then how a pope must feel, comforting the sinners of a sick world, healing the masses with a touch and a kind word.

Suddenly, Lieutenant St. James sprang to his feet. "I know what I have to do, Chaplain!"

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher edged toward the door again. Lieutenant St. James walked around the room, slamming his fist into his palm.

"I have to go on this operation. And I have to bring back my radio-operator alive. That's the only way. That's the only way they'll know . . . and I'll know. I must conquer my sin, if it is a sin."

The chaplain thought suddenly of his own sin. It came to him in the figure of a rotten-toothed whore in Saigon. He shuddered. He looked again at the lieutenant. Two sinners, he thought, preparing to test God's mercy. Surely his own sin, coming as it did from a chaplain, a representative of God, was at least as bad as the lieutenant's whose job was killing and whose sin was only a degree worse -- murder. And they both only thought they were guilty, although the chaplain couldn't understand exactly how a man could be mistaken about murders and mutilations. His own sin, anyway, was blurred in his memory by the haze of alcohol. That thought,
somehow meant to be consoling, only magnified the seriousness
of the sin. He closed his eyes. What they both needed,
both he and the lieutenant, was proof of their innocence.
And if not that, if that were past all possibility, then
at least a chance to prove themselves worthy in God's eyes.
An ordeal. They both needed a test of faith, or courage.
Perhaps the operation was the answer, the chance, each
needed.

"The only problem," Lieutenant St. James was saying,
"is that they won't give me another radio operator. They're
afraid I'll kill him, too."

The chaplain's eyes widened. Oh Lord, the test had been
thrust upon him! He prayed fervently for his ordeal to be
lessened. Give me, he prayed, an easier test. He waited.
There was no sign of mitigation from above. He sighed and
looked at Lieutenant St. James. His words rolled out like
the stone from the sepulchre, uncontrollable and inevitable.

"I will be your radio-operator."

Lieutenant St. James blinked in amazement.

"You? You, chaplain?"

The chaplain swallowed hard and nodded.

"Yes, my son. I can help you, and you can help me."

"Help you?" Lieutenant St. James said excitedly. "Help
you? Oh yes! Whatever you want! Liquor, chaplain? Girls?"

The last word fell like a blow to the chaplain's heart.
Oh Lord -- certainly not girls. He shook his head sadly,
reverently.
"No, my son. I have sins to alleviate, like you. My serving will show my humility. It will be my test under fire for God."

Lieutenant St. James was speechless with joy. He danced around the tent, which disconcerted the chaplain somewhat, and thanked the chaplain profusely. He promised to try his damnedest not to kill the chaplain, which further disconcerted the latter. Lieutenant St. James left the tent as if leaving a revival, singing hymns and clapping his hands. With a chaplain for an RTO, how could he lose?

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher lay down on his bunk and listened to the crazy murderer singing into the distance. The operation would be his fiery furnace, his lion's den. He would carry the radio as his cross and emerge, he hoped, victorious over his alleged sin. And thereafter, he would live second only to Jesus in piety.

It was a fair test, he concluded. Harsh, but fair. He was glad God had proposed it. He doubted that he ever would have thought of it, himself. In fact, he was certain of it.

He went to sleep and dreamed of carrying a clock-radio, that reminded him hourly of life's brevity, through the cloudy, wet streets of London and of being suddenly and violently disembowelled by Jack the Ripper, who sang hymns to him as he died and kept asking how anyone could be sure that he had committed a sin and that it wasn't God himself, who controls everything. The chaplain woke up quite upset. And the
thing that upset him most was the question. And the fact that the question was so unsettling upset him even more.

All the lights went on at once in the hospital. In one blinding flash, every light seemed to explode simultaneously. Spec Four Johnson thought vaguely that a bomb had fallen. He pulled the sheets over his head and tried to go back to sleep.

"Rise and shine! Rise and shine! Off the bed and outa the sheet, off your ass and on your feet!" The voice on the PA system boomed across the ward like a cannon shot. Spec Four Johnson felt a hand grab his foot and yank. The pain was excruciating. He felt like vomiting. Quickly, he sprang to a sitting position, ready to exterminate the sonofabitch who had grabbed his swollen foot.

He drew back his fist and almost hit the biggest man he'd ever seen. A giant voice rattled his eardrums.

"Wake up, dumbass! Get out and change your sheets!"

Spec Four Johnson had never seen a bigger man. The leering black sergeant was as wide as he was tall. And he was extremely tall. He was, furthermore, the PA system that had awakened the ward.

"I'm sick," Johnson protested.

"Well, of course you are," the big sergeant grinned. "Else you wouldn't be in here." He glared at Johnson, who edged out of bed on his swollen, aching feet.
"Please," he said to the sergeant. "I can hardly stand up."

The big sergeant threw a set of clean sheets at him. They hit him squarely in the chest and almost knocked him down.

"That's real fine, sport," the sergeant said. "Ol' Burk, there" — he pointed to the next bunk — "he'd give his left ball to even be able to hardly stand up."

Spec Four Johnson looked at the man. He lay pale and thin under his dirty sheet. Both of his legs were off at the knee.

"Now, why don't you just make up your bed, sport," the sergeant said tiredly. "While you can."

"While I can?"

"Your name's Johnson, ain't it?"

Spec Four Johnson nodded.

"Well, son, they just about got your order ready in the butcher shop."

The big sergeant chuckled and walked away.

Johnson stood by his bed wondering what the sergeant had meant. He finally made his bed hurriedly and got back into it.

"Want some help with that bed, man?"

Spec Four Johnson looked up. A short young man with sandy hair and only one arm was smiling at him from the foot of the bed.
"No thank you."

"Well, I'll tell you," the man said, coming around the side of the bed, "if you don't make it just right, they'll make you re-do it."

"Why should they care? It's my bed."

The young man shrugged. He turned and left, limping.

Spec Four Johnson watched him go. Then he looked around the ward. Something was wrong, unnatural. He realized what it was -- all the men in the ward had limbs missing. Johnson turned to the man next to him, the pale double-amputee.

"Say, man, what ward is this?"

The pale man just lay there. A little spit ran continuously down from the corner of his mouth. He stared emptily at the ceiling.

"It ain't the maternity ward."

Spec Four Johnson turned to find a gawky, freckled kid leaning on the end of the bed. The boy had only one leg. Jesus, Johnson thought nervously, what am I doing here?

"Your name Johnson?" the boy asked cheerfully.

Johnson nodded.

The boy stuck out his hand and grinned.

"Welcome to the club."

He grinned and hopped back to his own bed.

"Hey!" Spec Four Johnson yelled after him. "What club?"

The boy just grinned again and pointed to his missing leg.
Spec Four Johnson lay down and stared at the ceiling. His feet hurt badly, but not **that** badly. He would have to explain to the doctor that there had been a mistake. A terrible mistake. He stared at the white, blank ceiling.

Oh my God, he thought, a terrible mistake.

Sometime later, Major Spenser came into the ward. Three other doctors were with him, one old, one young, one middle-aged. They walked straight to Spec Four Johnson's bed. Major Spenser pulled back the sheet and pointed proudly to Johnson's feet. He smiled at the other doctors.

"Remarkable," said the tall, graying old doctor.

"Looks like a pair of sprained ankles," the young doctor said.

The others glared at him.

"Men don't sprain their ankles in bed," Major Spenser said disgustedly. He turned to the others. "What do you make of it, gentlemen?" he asked, quite proud of his discovery.

"Obvious," said the old doctor.

"Obvious what?" Spec Four Johnson asked nervously. The doctors all ignored him, except the young one, who winked.

"Perfectly obvious," agreed the middle-aged doctor.

They all looked at the young doctor. He didn't really know what he was expected to say.

"Quite likely," he hedged.
The others muttered and turned away.

"This morning, gentlemen?" asked Major Spenser, smiling.
"Certainly," said the old doctor.
"At the latest," agreed the middle doctor.

They all turned to the young doctor, who hadn't been listening. He had been watching the man in the next bunk dribble onto his sheet. He saw the doctors frowning at him.

"Quite likely," he said quickly. "Quite likely." It had worked all right once before, and, besides, he had no idea what they were talking about. He smiled at them.

The doctors muttered and turned back to look at the feet.


The middle-aged doctor and the old doctor nodded and each reached forward in turn to squeeze the foot. Each time, Johnson screamed. They nodded at each other every time he screamed. It was obvious, they agreed, and this morning at the very latest. They turned to the young doctor.

He had watched in horror as they had squeezed the blue, infected feet. He had winced with each scream.

"I think you're hurting him," he said.

Spec Four Johnson nodded furiously in agreement.

"It's only a reaction," Major Spenser informed him disdainfully. "A reaction to the squeezing." The other two doctors nodded. "Now, gentlemen, the crucial issue,"
Major Spenser said sternly. "Below the ankle?"

They all looked at each other thoughtfully.

The young doctor smiled and then straightened his face. "Below the knee," he said gravely.

"Below the knee?" the middle-aged doctor asked.

"Below the ankle," the old one said firmly.

"Below the knee," Major Spenser said, nodding at the young doctor. "Below the knee."

The old doctor frowned. "Below the ankle."

"Below the knee," Major Spenser said angrily.

"Below the hip," the young doctor chimed in cheerily.

"Below the hip?" Major Spenser looked at him, surprised at the boldness of the suggestion. "Hmmm, yes," he said, "below the hip."

"Below the ankle," the old doctor insisted.

"Below the hip."

"Below the knee!" the middle-aged doctor shouted.

Everyone was getting excited. "Below the hip!"

"Below the ankle!"

"Below the knee!"

They glared at each other and screamed. The young doctor smiled.

"Below the hip!"

"Below the ankle!"

"Below the knee!"
Major Spenser stamped his feet.
"Below the chin!" he yelled.

The other two doctors looked at him strangely. Sweat poured down his face. "Below the what?" they asked incredulously.

Major Spenser blushed.

"We have work to do, gentlemen," he said quickly. He turned and left. As the others turned to follow the old doctor and the middle-aged doctor paused to squeeze Johnson's feet.

He shrieked in pain. The young doctor frowned at them and patted Johnson on the knee.

After they were gone, Spec Four Johnson lay quietly while his feet ached and pulsed. Below the chin, he thought. Good God! He knew now what the big sergeant had meant -- the butcher shop. He lay painfully, staring at the ceiling, trying to figure out a plan of escape.

"Cheer up. It could be worse."

Spec Four Johnson looked beside his bed. A small, dark young soldier sat cross-legged on the floor, smiling at Johnson.

"After a while, you get used to it," he said. "There at first, you'll be playing hopscotch every time you try to walk, but you get used to it."

Spec Four Johnson closed his eyes and tried to wake up. It was all a nightmare, he said to himself, and it would all
go away if he could just wake up. When he opened his eyes again, the little man was talking again.

"Just look at Haverly there. Hey, Haverly!" he yelled across the ward. "Come over here! Haverly stayed on here as an aide after they fixed him."

A stocky, muscled black soldier walked jerkily toward him. He had a hook-type contraption where his right arm should be.

"Haverly lost both legs and an arm in a rocket attack," the boy said. "And he got used to it. At least you'll still have both arms."

Haverly grinned. He grabbed one of Spec Four Johnson's feet and squeezed. Johnson screamed.

"Sure, buddy," Haverly grinned. "Get rid of 'em and they won't hurt anymore."

Spec Four Johnson panted heavily. He could hardly catch his breath. "I . . . I . . . oughta take . . . you apart," he said angrily.

Haverly grinned.

"Shouldn't be hard, buddy," he said. "A buckle here, a buckle there." He winked at the boy on the floor and left.

Spec Four Johnson wanted to cry. He looked angrily at the little man who smiled up at him from the floor. He started to ask him why the hell he was here. He noticed that the boy had lost none of his limbs. He didn't even look wounded.
Suddenly, terrible cries were heard from overhead. Hysterical screams filtered down through the ceiling.

"They're taking another one to the operating room," the little man said, still smiling. "They all yell like that when they find out." He shook his head and chuckled.

Spec Four Johnson listened, horrified, as the screams died out. He supposed the man must be in the butcher shop now.

"That's where I used to be," the little man said.

Johnson stared down at the man. Nothing was missing. The dark little man pointed overhead. "That's the VD ward."

Johnson stared dumbly. Good God, he thought sickly. Surely he can't mean ....

The little man smiled crookedly. His eyes gleamed in a strange way, like crazy old Buck Terry's eyes gleamed back home in Johnson's town. He spoke softly, still smiling, his smile now more of a leer.

"Man, they only do amputations here. That's all they do." He chuckled bitterly. "That's the cure around here for everything."

Spec Four Johnson heard a piercing cry from overhead. He leaped out of bed and ran like a madman on his swollen feet, out the door and down the hall and away from the hospital.

He didn't stop running until he got back to the battery.
When General Rush inspected the briefing room, he decided it was too small for all the officers concerned with the operation, so he excluded those whose last names started with an odd letter.

Captain Watson, the commander of "A" Battery, was furious when he heard that he was excluded. He never got to go to briefings. He paced in his office all morning and cursed General Rush and the silly circles on his map.

At noon, he stalked into the mess hall and accosted Sergeant Blake, the mess sergeant. "What the hell's so odd about 'W'?" he demanded.

Sergeant Blake had no idea what the captain was talking about. He had never had any feelings one way or the other about the letter. He did, however, think Captain Watson a little odd for asking, though. Noticing how distraught the captain was, he tried to pacify him.

"Ain't nothin' odd about it at all, Cap'n."

Captain Watson looked him straight in the eye.

"Now, give me a straight answer, Blake. Do you think it's fair to exclude someone just because his last name starts with a 'W'?"

Sergeant Blake saw that the captain was really serious about it all and that it had upset him terribly.
"No, sir, I sure don't," he said firmly. "In fact, I got two men on KP right now that have them kind of last names." He pointed to the kitchen. "Wilkins and Perry."

"Perry doesn't start with a 'W', you idiot." Captain Watson stalked back out of the messhall without bothering to eat.

Sergeant Blake watched the battery commander go. He felt a little bad that the captain hadn't eaten anything — a man in his condition needed all the help he could get. A little brain food like fish probably wouldn't hurt, he snickered. Then he went back to the kitchen to tell Perry he wasn't on KP and to find out who was. Maybe Captain Watson was. The thought made him snicker again.

Colonel Majeskie was delighted to find his name started with an odd letter. He didn't want to know any more about the operation than he had to.

Besides, he was busy with a special project. As the many terrible thoughts of death and snipers and chopper crashes had filed though his mind, the thought that stuck out most was the he might get in trouble and find that his radio had gone out. Without a radio to call for help, Colonel Majeskie wouldn't stand a ghost of a chance.

So he had made up leaflets to drop on his troops, bearing the word HELP! in big green letters. But, as he was making out the leaflets, Colonel Majeskie had thought
suddenly of an old war movie he had seen in which leaflets had been dropped on the enemy demanding their surrender. From what he could remember, it had worked. Colonel Majeskie had joyously thought of the results he might obtain with such leaflets. If he could get them all to surrender, there would be no battle. And no bullets. Or snipers. Or fiery helicopter crashes.

With this in mind, Colonel Majeskie set about making up leaflets to drop on the Viet Cong. First, he wrote down basic orders: RETREAT, SURRENDER, CEASE FIRE. Soon, however, he became quite involved in the project, and began writing terse, stern commands: GIVE UP, YOU DON'T STAND A CHANCE, HANG IT UP. He tried to think of threats he had heard in the movie or on TV: DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOUR FAMILY IS? WE DO. COME OUT PEACEFULLY AND NOT MUCH HARM WILL COME TO THEM. He read them to himself. They made his heart pound -- so simple, so direct, so threatening. He could picture hundreds of demoralized VC streaming out of bunkers and huts and surrendering with tears in their eyes.

Colonel Majeskie's inventiveness played out soon, however, and he found himself writing downright crude messages: GIVE UP OR WE'LL BLOW YOUR ASSES OFF. He put down his pencil and stretched his fingers. He had enough messages and threats, he felt, to turn the tide of the war. Maybe even to get a medal.
Quickly, he called in Sergeant Hightower and gave him the leaflets, telling him to run off a hundred of each immediately.

Sergeant Hightower read a few of them, then looked at the colonel curiously.

"Who are they for?" he asked.

"The enemy, of course," Colonel Majeskie snapped.

Sergeant Hightower looked at the notes again.

"Do you want stamps?"

Colonel Majeskie frowned. "Of course not. Why would I need stamps?"

"You going to mail these things?"

"No, I'm not going to mail them. Now, do what I ordered!"

Sergeant Hightower shrugged and left. Colonel Majeskie was a real crackpot, he decided for the thousandth time. He wondered if it would really be wise to assign him to permanent latrine duty, though. He wasn't certain how Colonel Majeskie could screw up a latrine, but he had the greatest confidence in the man.

General Rush arrived at the briefing room twenty minutes late. He glanced around the packed room. It made him feel good to see his officers arrive early for briefings. It promised to be a successful operation with that kind of promptness and dedication.
"Gentlemen," he began, "this will be a successful operation. I suppose I should start by saying thank you for coming today . . .." The officers looked at each other. ". . . but I won't, because if you weren't here, I'd court-martial you for being AWOL." General Rush smiled, thinking a little humor would put the men at ease. They all shifted nervously and looked at each other. General Rush grew irritated. Didn't the bastards have a sense of humor? Not one of them even smiled. He was angry now. "And if any of you bastards aren't here," he continued crossly, "you're in deep trouble." He made a note to take down the names of the men who weren't there.

"We have an important operation scheduled in a few hours. We have to be ready, because the enemy will be. And who is that enemy?" He looked around the room. A hand went up. One of the infantry platoon leaders followed it, a tall, athletic lieutenant.

"The Viet Cong, sir," he replied confidently, aware of the jealous eyes on him.

"Wrong, Captain!" General Rush boomed out.

The lieutenant sat down quickly, not unaware of the amused eyes following him down. "I'm a lieutenant, sir," he muttered.

"You sound like a lieutenant with that kind of answer, Captain," General Rush said from the podium. "No, gentlemen, failure is our enemy. The Viet Cong are only an obstacle
in the way of our success. Failure is our enemy."

The infantry lieutenant tried to redeem himself by whispering loudly, "It's those obstacles I'm worried about, then. The hell with the enemy." He looked around for approval. The officers all ignored him. He slumped in his chair, feeling himself a failure, and thus the branded enemy. He wished he'd never stood up.

General Rush continued his speech. "And we can best defeat the enemy by succeeding, gentlemen. And the only way we can succeed is by not failing. Are there any questions?"

Taking his life in his hands, the infantry lieutenant forced himself to his feet. He had to redeem himself. It was now or never.

"Where are we going, sir?" he asked.

A hush fell over the room. The general stood stroking his chin. Finally, he spoke.

"Damned good question, Captain."

The lieutenant sat down, fully aware of the envious eyes and the admiring murmurs that encircled him.

"A damned good question, indeed." General Rush mulled over the question thoughtfully. "Hmmm." Finally, Major Jones, the operations officer of the brigade, came out and whispered in his ear. The general nodded and turned around. He walked over to the wall in back of the stage and pulled down a large map, looking closely at it for a long time. The operations officer came over at last and put his finger on a spot.
"Oh, yes," General Rush said and put his own finger on the spot. "Right here, gentlemen."

The officers in the room leaned forward to see. This irritated the general. They have their own maps, he reasoned. They didn't need to be looking over his shoulder like that.

"You all have your own maps," he growled. "Look at them."

The officers grumbled and opened their maps noisily. They looked on each other's maps and then back at their own, trying to find the spot.

"Right here, goddamnit!" General Rush pounded the map. He couldn't believe this was the same bunch of officers who had arrived early for the briefing.

The officers leaned forward again to look at the general's map.

"Look at your own goddamn maps!" he roared and jumped in front of his map. "You've got those maps for a reason!"

Finally, a young captain stood up and nervously adjusted his glasses. He cleared his throat several times.

"Sir, could you give us the grid co-ordinates, so we can find it on our maps?"

General Rush glared at the man.

"It's confidential, Lieutenant."

Major Jones, the brigade operations officer, rushed out and whispered again the general's ear. General Rush drew back, astounded.

"All of them?" he said in amazement, pointing at the roomful of officers.
The major nodded.

"Bullshit," General Rush snorted. He couldn't imagine telling the whole roomful of strangers where they were going. He could picture them gossipping to the enlisted men about it -- before long, everybody in the whole damned brigade would know! It was ridiculous to tell the men where they were going -- they just worried about it and then got upset if they didn't go where they had been told they were going.

"You'll find out soon enough where you're going," he told them. It's a village called Rong Song" -- the officers looked quickly at their maps -- "but you won't find it on your maps. It's small. And besides, I'm sure you'll all agree, one VC village looks just like every other VC village."

Most of the officers nodded, some in agreement, others from lack of sleep. A few yawned.

"And I guarantee," General Rush pointed at the officers, "I guarantee -- everybody there is Viet Cong."

A murmur passed through the room.

General Rush smiled.

"I have this information from a very reliable, very secret, source." Just that morning, he had cornered Suzie while she was cleaning his boots. He knew her mainly as his housegirl, a whiz at shining boots, but he had long suspected her of being a plaything for the Viet Cong. Her slanted eyes gave her away.

"You're really a plaything for them, aren't you?" he had demanded. Having read in the Stars and Stripes a few
days earlier that the Viet Cong often used villagers working for the Americans to gain their devious ends, General Rush had rushed right out of the latrine and into the barber shop. There he found Joe, a native who had been Headquarters barber for almost two years. With easy access to the throats of every man and officer in the division, at one time or another, he was the likeliest suspect. And Joe made strange and suspicious remarks.

"How are your men, General?" he asked as he saw General Rush walk in.

General Rush grunted. The bastards always inquire about the morale of the men, he had read. Low morale means vulnerability to attack.

"I notice your men no come in much for haircuts anymore," Joe smiled. "I guess they no have money. Tsk, tsk," he clucked.

"They've got plenty of money," General Rush growled and made a note to order every man in the division to get his hair cut.

General Rush suspected Joe, but he could never pin anything on him. He knew the sonofabitch was a Viet Cong by the way he couldn't talk good English. And he listened to that damned ching-chang Vietnamese music on the radio in his shop. Suzie, he felt would be easier. She wasn't so cagey. She listened to the Armed Forces radio station all day and chewed gum.
"Play-ting?" She had looked at General Rush with big, wide, innocent eyes. "I no unnerstan' play-ting."


"Ah, boom-boom," Suzie had replied, smiling her gold-speckled smile and unbuttoning her blouse.

"No, goddamnit!" General Rush had sputtered. "Not now! For the VC! The VC!"

"Two hundred piasters."

"No, no, no!"

Suzie had pouted and buttoned up her blouse. She hesitated a moment.

"OK, cheap charlie. One hundred fifty, and that's it, GI!"

"I don't want to boom-boom, you idiot!" General Rush had exploded. He reached over and turned off her radio. "Where are the VC?"

Suzie had pouted some more. She had looked at him with pursed lips. "Play my song."

"What song?"

"On the radio."

General Rush had had no idea what song the girl wanted to hear, but he could see she was going to be hard to break. He had switched on the radio. A country music program was on, and Buck Owens nasally sang of lost love.
Suzie had listened intently for a moment, the crossed her arms defiantly. "Wrong song," she had said at last.

General Rush had furrowed his brow thoughtfully.

"Wrong song, wrong song," he had said over and over to himself.

"Wrong song," Suzie had insisted.

Suddenly, it had dawned on General Rush. Slapping his head, he had put the girl's radio in his pocket and gone immediately to his big office map. Running his finger quickly along the MeKong River, he had found it: Rong Song, a little farming village a few miles inland from the river. Rong Song, Suzie had said. He had looked back at the map.

At first, General Rush had found it hard to believe. Rong Song. He knew Rong Song, and he knew some of the village leaders. He had always thought them friendly enough, but now, as he thought about it, he could see the villainy hidden in their easy command of the language and in their kindness to him and his men.

General Rush raised his hand to hush the mumbling in the briefing room. "You gentlemen may be surprised at our source of intelligence for this operation." He paused until they were all quiet. "A native working within this division."

More mumbling ensued. Finally, an infantry captain stood up, nervously fingerling his glasses.

"Sir, exactly where was the informer employed?" he asked.

General Rush smiled proudly.
"As my housegirl."

The mumbling among the officers rose to a new high pitch.
"You fired her, of course," the infantry captain said, shocked.

General Rush scowled.
"Nonsense," he snorted. "I can't pick her friends for her."

The officers talked loudly among themselves.
"But, sir," the infantry captain protested, "how do you know she's not a double-agent?"

General Rush glared at the captain coldly.
"What if she is, Lieutenant? Do you think I discuss military problems with her?"

The captain blushed. "No, uh, I, uh . . . no, sir . . . ."
"Just what did you mean, Lieutenant?" General Rush demanded indignantly.

The captain took his glasses off and then put them back on again. He felt all the eyes on him and wished he'd never stood up.
"Well, I . . . uh . . . ."

"Speak up, Lieutenant!" General Rush growled. "What do you think the girl could learn shining my boots? The size of my feet?"

The captain shifted nervously from one foot to the other.
"Uh, well . . . yes, sir . . . I guess . . . . "

General Rush glared at the captain.
"When you get to be a general, Lieutenant, then you can start worrying about double-agents."

The infantry captain sat down quickly and spent the rest of the time cleaning his glasses.

General Rush was glad the briefing was over. He put the grease pencil he was using in his pocket, where Majeskie's penholder was. He turned to leave and noticed that all the officers were still sitting in their chairs, gawking at him.

"Don't gawk at me, goddamnit," he growled at them.

"There's work to be done."

Someone shoved a skinny infantry lieutenant to his feet. Reluctantly, he stuttered his question.

"Uh, s-s-sir . . . uh, you didn't . . . uh . . . where . . . uh . . . ."

"I didn't what, Captain?" General Rush repeated.

"Well," the lieutenant began, "well . . . I . . . uh . . . I don't know exactly what you didn't . . . uh . . . but, I . . . ."

General Rush glared at the lieutenant until he sat down.

"Then how do you know I didn't, Captain?" With that, he turned and left the room.

Soon after, the officers got up and followed, mumbling among themselves, wondering what the general had told them or hadn't told them, or even if he had . . . or hadn't.

"Absolutely not, Chaplain, Out of the question."

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher was dismayed.
"But, sir," he protested, "I must. It's something between the Lord and me." He couldn't believe Colonel Majeskie wouldn't let him carry Lieutenant St. James's radio on the operation.

Colonel Majeskie was adamant.

"That's why I want you in my helicopter, Chaplain, to put something between the Lord and me. Something good and solid." He thought of what he'd said and added quickly, "Like your faith, Chaplain."

"But, Colonel, you don't understand! The Lord wants me to carry that radio. It's my test, my penance."

Colonel Majeskie eyed the chaplain suspiciously.

"Penance for what, Chaplain?"

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher blushed and looked down.

"Personal trespasses, Colonel," he said humbly.

Colonel Majeskie raised his eyebrows.

"Trespassing, is it? Well, don't you worry about that, Chaplain. I can fix that up for you. You don't need to trouble the Lord. Where'd you go? Saigon?"

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher flinched visibly at the word.

"Please, Colonel," he pleaded, "just let me do this one thing . . . ."

"What about my operation, Chaplain?" demanded Colonel Majeskie, who was becoming very possessive about his operation. "Who's going to be up there telling God where to put the artillery if you're on the ground?"
The chaplain shook his head sadly.

"I couldn't help you, anyway, Colonel," he said. "I'm not clean." He looked pleadingly at Colonel Majeskie. "You must let me cleanse myself."

"Now, Chaplain," Colonel Majeskie frowned, feeling more and more like a commander, "there's no time for that. You're all dressed to go, and we're leaving in less than an hour. Besides, the Lord knows it's so damned dusty down here, you just can't keep clean." He looked at his watch.

"Colonel!"

Colonel Majeskie looked up to find the chaplain staring wildly at him. He cleared his throat and started to edge down in his chair.

"Colonel," the chaplain said, "if you take me up in that helicopter and keep me from doing God's will"—he stared at the colonel—"I cannot be responsible for the consequences."

Colonel Majeskie gasped. He pictured his helicopter blown into a million pieces by a giant bolt of lightning.

"Well, uh, ahem," he cleared his throat again. "Of ... of ... of course, you are a grown man, Chaplain, and ... ah ... heh, heh ... I can't force you to ... uh ... ."

Quickly, he stood up. "Chaplain, you and I are good friends, aren't we? Well, you use your own judgment, Chaplain."

Colonel Majeskie turned quickly and left the office, wondering if the chaplain were some kind of witch. He felt much better when he went to pick up his field gear and found his leaflets
tucked away in a waterproof pouch.

By God, he thought, I'll do it without the chaplain.

The fleet of helicopters had to make several sorties to carry all the men out to the field. Once there, the companies would spread out around the village and wait for nightfall. Then the bombardment would begin. Captain Watson's battery, on order from the field commander, would pour round after round of artillery on the enemy village. The infantry would wait in their positions to snare any VC who tried to escape.

The men on the ground bustled around like ants, or so it seemed to Colonel Majeskie, circling overhead in his helicopter. His spirits, rather dampened by the chaplain's ominous threat, were brightened considerably by two developments. First, General Rush had decided not to go up in a chopper but rather to set up his headquarters in a neighboring, almost identical, village a short distance from Rong Song. This left Colonel Majeskie free from General Rush's careful supervision. Secondly, Colonel Majeskie was elated to find out how far removed from the ground action he would actually be, flying a thousand feet overhead.

The sun was shining, and Colonel Majeskie whistled happily as the chopper puttered in lazy circles through the sky. He felt every inch a commander.
Down on the ground, Lieutenant Colonel John Burnside seethed. He watched Colonel Majeskie's chopper cutting around arrogantly in loops that should have been his own. But Colonel Majeskie, as brigade commander, had ordered Lieutenant Colonel Burnside to lead the battalion on the ground.

And it was degrading. Lieutenant Colonel Burnside loved flying. He loved to circle over his operations, moving companies around like jigsaw pieces until a single neat picture emerged. He loved to swoop down and shout at company commanders who moved too slowly, and he enjoyed nothing better than flying low over an enemy village and shooting his pistol at the terrified enemy.

He watched bitterly as the chopper soared almost out of sight. He thought it highly unfair that a desk-jockey like Majeskie should be allowed to ground him. Glancing around the paddies, all he could see was hundreds of muddy soldiers. They looked much better, he thought, from a few hundred feet up.

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside had had high hopes when General Rush had called him in to head the infantry battalion in the operation. He had wondered vaguely why the brigade had no battalion commanders of its own. It seemed odd to him that only a handful of captains were left in charge of whole battalions. But he welcomed the opportunity to move into the
leadership of a dumpy battalion in Colonel Majeskie's once-polished and once-proud brigade. He didn't know how the brigade had fallen into disrepute, or why, but he saw this as the perfect chance to show the Pentagon people that he was ready to wear the birds of a full colonel. If he could straighten out this ragged battalion, he could do most anything.

After only a day with his new battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Burnside had sensed the monumentality of the task before him. Rumors had flown at him from all sides of whole battalions stranded for days and ambushed, of capable battalion commanders falling helplessly like flies. Incredible, he had thought, but the casualty reports had borne out the rumors. He had gone immediately to Colonel Majeskie.

"This is war, Burnside," Colonel Majeskie had told him calmly, not at all surprised at the casualty reports.

"But, Colonel, you've lost more men that the rest of the division put together!"

Colonel Majeskie had been irritated at such insolence from a newcomer. How could a man expect to walk into a new job and tell the boss what to do? Colonel Majeskie realized that a lot of men had died. It worried him. Between worrying about the dead men and worrying about the back window, the colonel wasn't eating right, and his letters to Madeleine were becoming more sarcastic and surly. The war had been telling on him, surely and harshly.
"Burnside," he had said wearily, "have you seen my commanders? They're all green captains ... captains commanding battalions."

"That's because all the colonels get killed, as I understand," Lieutenant Colonel Burnside had snapped angrily.

"And that is why you're here," Colonel Majeskie had snapped back.

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside had stood dumb a moment. He wasn't sure, but he thought he had been threatened. It made him angry.

"I don't intend to be killed, Colonel."

"How do you expect to prevent it?" Colonel Majeskie had asked, genuinely interested in new ways of preventing death, including his own.

"By watching my step." Lieutenant Colonel Burnside had stood a moment, glaring at Colonel Majeskie. Then he had leaned across the colonel's desk menacingly. "When will my chopper be ready?"

Colonel Majeskie had smiled. "You won't be using one."

"Just what does that mean?" Burnside had demanded.

"You'll be on the ground ... watching your step."

So Lieutenant Colonel Burnside shook his fist jealously at the tiny speck that was Colonel Majeskie's chopper. Looking up into the sun, he tripped over a dike and almost fell into the mud, but was caught by his radio-operator.

"Better watch your step, sir," the man said to him.
"Oh, shut up."

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside looked up at the sky and cursed.

Captain Watson was upset. Someone had been throwing rocks at his hooch. At least three times in the last hour, he had heard a loud "crack" on his wall and had run outside to catch the culprit, but each time the phantom rock-thrower had disappeared.

Just a few moments before, Lieutenant Galtry had come in, moaning and rubbing his forehead. He claimed he had been hit by a rock just outside the battery commander's hooch.

"Is it swelling?" he moaned. "It feels like it's swelling."

Captain Watson looked disgustedly at Lieutenant Galtry. Old friends from college, he had discovered, can become a pain in the ass.

"How does it look, Morley?"

Captain Watson flinched. He never should have let the sap start calling him by his first name. It was becoming irritating.

"Did you see who did it?" he asked Lieutenant Galtry, who still sat rubbing his head. Captain Watson thought the rock-thrower was probably Lieutenant Stillman, as he couldn't think of anyone else in the world with any reason to dislike him.

"No," Lieutenant Galtry said, "but I heard him laugh."
"Who did it sound like?"
Lieutenant Galtry thought a moment.
"Well . . . it sounded a little like Mae West."
Captain Watson stared incredulously.
"Mae West? You think Mae West is throwing rocks at my office?"
Lieutenant Galtry was hurt.
"Well, no . . . but it sounded like her."
"Try again. Who? Who could it possibly be?"
"Well . . . General Rush, maybe."
Captain Watson paced the room angrily. Fraternity brother or not, the bastard was an idiot.
"You idiot!" he yelled. "Why would General Rush throw rocks at me?"
"Well, I didn't say it was him. You asked me who it sounded like laughing, and he's the only one I've heard laugh since I've been in Viet Nam."
Captain Watson glared at the man. General Rush. Mae West. It all suddenly struck him as blackly humorous, and he laughed bitterly.
"It sounded just like that, Morley." Lieutenant Galtry was pointing excitedly at him.
"Like what?"
"What you just did -- the laugh."
Captain Watson couldn't believe it. He pinched himself to see if it were a bad dream.
"You think I'm throwing rocks at my own office?"

Lieutenant Galtry pouted.

"Well . . . no . . . but, you asked me who it sounded like . . . ."

Captain Watson raised his hand.

"Forget it. Forget it. Try this one. Have you seen Lieutenant Stillman?"

Lieutenant Galtry perked up.

"I sure did, Morley. He was in the library a little while ago."

"Go get him, and bring him to me."

"Sure thing, Morley."

Lieutenant Galtry took his feet off Captain Watson's desk and went out excitedly.

Captain Watson looked at his wall map. There were no circles. General Rush hadn't told him, or anyone else, exactly where the operation would be. With no circles on the map, it looked bare and new. And Captain Watson, himself, felt bare and new. Alone in his office, far from the war, he was a man singled out by fate to be slighted, while pompous asses like General Rush roared around the rice paddies, scooping up fame and medals. The bastard. The were all bastards, he decided, all of them. Lieutenant Galtry was a worthless, leeching bastard. Lieutenant St. James was a selfish bastard. Spec Four Johnson, who had shown up ridiculous and breathless in his pajamas a few days before, was a gold-bricking, insolent bastard. Colonel Majeskie was an incompetent
bastard. General Rush and Lieutenant Stillman were glory-grabbing bastards. Even Lieutenant Morrison in FDC was a bastard, a non-committal one. And Captain Watson considered himself to be a down-trodden, luckless bastard.

Captain Watson looked up to see the two lieutenants standing at the door.

"Well, what are you waiting for, you bastard?" he growled. The two lieutenants looked at each other.

"He wants you, Lieutenant Stillman said and turned to leave.

"Not you, you bastard. You!" Captain Watson pointed at Lieutenant Stillman. Lieutenant Galtry started to come in, too, but Captain Watson waved him out.

"Where should I go, Morley?" he asked, quite hurt by the rejection.

"Go get a hair cut."

Lieutenant Galtry took off his cap. His hair was incredibly short. It stood dark and brittle like a burned-off cornfield.

"Gosh, Morley, I don't think I need one . . . ." He ran his hand over his head.

"Well, just go somewhere and let it grow." Captain Watson was beginning to detest the man.

"I don't know if I should, Morley . . . ."

"Go!" Captain Watson shouted.

Lieutenant Galtry left hurriedly, scratching his head, wondering how to make his hair grow.
Captain Watson watched Galtry scratching his head. He supposed that bastard Johnson had brought back his fungus with him. Captain Watson's own head tingled a little, but he refused to scratch it. He turned angrily to Lieutenant Stillman, who stood innocently looking at the bare map on the wall.

"New map, sir?"

"No, it's not a goddamed new map. Where have you been tonight, Stillman?"

"In the library, sir."

Captain Watson narrowed his eyes as evilly as he could.

"You haven't been throwing any rocks, have you?"

"Oh, no, sir. They'll kick you out of the library if you do that."

Captain Watson put his face in his hands and closed his eyes, certain that when he opened them, all the bastards would be out of his life forever.

"Are you all right, sir?" Lieutenant Stillman asked.

Captain Watson looked up.

"Stillman, I want you to go to the FDC and work there during this operation, and don't leave that room under penalty of death."

Lieutenant Stillman gasped dramatically.

"Death, sir? Certainly, sir, certainly." He turned and left.

Captain Watson sat looking at his wall a few moments. Suddenly, his trance was broken by a loud craaack! The thin
wall of the office shook. Captain Watson leaped to his feet and bolted out the door.

"Stillman!"

Lieutenant Stillman, who was walking toward the FDC, turned around.

"Did you throw that rock, you bastard?" Captain Watson yelled angrily.

"Oh, no, sir. Certainly not."

"Did you see who did?"

"No, sir."

Captain Watson paused a moment.

"Did you hear anyone laugh?"

Lieutenant Stillman thought a second.

"Well, I'm not sure . . . ." he said hesitantly. "Yes, maybe I did."

"Who did it sound like?" Captain Watson asked sarcastically.

"Mae West?" He sneered. "Or General Rush?"

Lieutenant Stillman looked curiously at the captain.

"The rock didn't hit you, did it, sir?"

Captain Watson turned around to leave, feeling a blush arising. He felt like a fool.

"Sir?"

He turned back around.

"Do you know who it really sounded like?"

Captain Watson was silent.

"It sounded like Lieutenant Galtry."

Lieutenant Stillman walked away, whistling.
Captain Watson stood alone in the dust, feeling ridiculously martyred in a hopeless battle with bastards.

Colonel Majeskie had almost forgotten about the bewitching sirens in the laundry and the invisible sniper outside his office window. He was finding the war a pleasant thing from a thousand feet up. He surveyed the green, wet countryside and found it, too, pleasant. The land seemed so serene lying there, despite the numerous bomb craters, showing its sweet face to the heavens like a green young boy, pocked but beautiful. He thought of buying a place here after the war. Maybe he would set up a laundry. Then he thought of Madeleine—she would never approve of the laundry, replete with topless laundry girls. Thinking so intently of the laundry lured Colonel Majeskie unconsciously back to thoughts of his office, and then inevitably... the sniper! He looked down and shuddered.

"Climb higher," he ordered the pilot, who frowned and pretended not to hear.

As Colonel Majeskie tried to get the pilot's attention, he noticed a voice crackling out of his radio. All he could make out was a nasty growl. He knew it was General Rush. Quickly, he picked up his handset.

"One five Papa. One five Papa. Over." He was very careful to use the proper radio procedure. He didn't want to anger General Rush.
"Get your ass down here, Majeskie!" the general's voice came back.

Disregarding the general's neglect of proper radio procedure, Colonel Majeskie signed off and reluctantly ordered the chopper pilot to set down at the general's command post.

General Rush had set himself and his staff up in a hooch in a small village near Rong Song. When Colonel Majeskie's helicopter landed, the wind it produced blew the thatched roof off the general's hooch. General Rush charged out, yelling and cursing and waving his hands.

"Cut that goddamn thing off!" he yelled.

Colonel Majeskie, still sitting in the chopper, couldn't understand over the roar of the chopper. He leaned over to the pilot and yelled, "What did he say?"

The pilot yelled back, "I think he said to take off!"

Colonel Majeskie looked back at General Rush, who was waving his arms wildly and bracing himself against the wind from the chopper blades. Colonel Majeskie couldn't hear the general and leaned out, cupping his ear. Just as he did, the pilot, assuming he was to take off, did so, throwing the colonel out the door and blowing General Rush into a water-filled paddy.

The pilot hesitated only a moment before soaring out of sight.

General Rush and Colonel Majeskie sat looking at each other from their respective paddies.
"You are undoubtedly one of nature's natural fools,"

General Rush said at last.

"I couldn't hear you, sir."

"I said, 'you are undoubtedly . . .'!"

"I heard that, sir," Colonel Majeskie said nervously.

"I mean, when I was in the chopper. I couldn't hear you then."

General Rush glared at him.

"I was saying, you goddamned dunce, to shut off the god-damned engine before you blew my headquarters away."

Colonel Majeskie blushed.

"Oh. I couldn't understand you, sir. The engine was so loud and all . . . ."

"Shut up, Majeskie," General Rush growled. He stood up and shook the water out of his pantlegs. "Come with me," he said roughly. Colonel Majeskie followed sheepishly.

Inside the hooch, which was now roofless and exposed to the sun, General Rush sat down, while his staff scooted around picking up things the helicopter had blown about.

Colonel Majeskie remained standing. He had glanced around the room and seen several other chairs, some lying on the hard, packed dirt floor, but he hadn't been invited to take one. So he stood up, shifting nervously from foot to foot.

General Rush eyed the colonel disapprovingly. The sonofabitch had roared in like a hurricane, and now he was pulling the old psychological trick of trying to seem superior by standing over the general, making him look up as he spoke.
The thought of looking up to Majeskie rankled him. He looked up quickly.

"Sit down," he ordered.

Colonel Majeskie picked up a chair and sat down. General Rush stood up. He'd beat the sonofabitch at his own game. Colonel Majeskie, seeing the general standing and remembering protocol, stood up, too. General Rush couldn't believe the man's brashness.

"Sit down!" he roared. "I know what you're up to!"

"Up to, sir?" asked Colonel Majeskie, wide-eyed and confused.

"Why aren't you supervising this operation like you're supposed to be?" General Rush demanded, looking hard at the colonel.

"You . . . you called me down here, sir," Colonel Majeskie stuttered, fidgeting in his chair.

"I don't mean now, Majeskie." General Rush pointed toward Rong Song. "Do you realize the noise those men of yours are making? Do you suppose we're going to surprise the enemy when we come sloshing and tramping in like a goddamned infantry battalion?"

Colonel Majeskie was utterly confused and intimidated.

"Sir, we are an infantry battalion."

"I know that, Majeskie. But do we have to sound like it? My men didn't raise all that hell coming in. Nobody even noticed us." General Rush pointed to the four officers
who were scurrying around, picking up maps. "We didn't sound like any goddamned *infantry* battalion."

Colonel Majeskie was going to remind the general that his four men *weren't* an infantry battalion, when he heard a noise at the door of the hooch. He turned around and saw a half-dozen dark little faces peering in and giggling. General Rush saw them, too.

"Get out of my headquarters, you little Jap bastards!"

Colonel Majeskie corrected him gently.

"Uh, sir . . . those kids were Vietnamese . . . ."

General Rush growled at the children. They giggled and growled back. He turned sharply to Colonel Majeskie.

"I know a Jap bastard when I see one, Majeskie."

"But, sir," Colonel Majeskie protested, "how can they be Japanese? They live here . . . in Viet Nam."

General Rush glowered at the tittering children.

"Jap bastards are everywhere, Majeskie." He pulled his pistol and pointed it at the kids. "Get outa here!" They giggled and left. General Rush turned to Colonel Majeskie.

"So, why can't yours?"

Colonel Majeskie was lost.

"Sir?"

"Why can't your men be quiet? Look, Majeskie," General Rush pointed out gently, "if we expect to accomplish our mission and run up a big body count, we have to keep those Jap bastards in the village. And, to do that, we have to be damned sneaky positioning our men. Follow?"
Colonel Majeskie nodded.

"So keep the bastards quiet!" General Rush roared.

Bowing out humbly, Colonel Majeskie excused himself and asked one of General Rush's men to call his helicopter for him. He had left his radio on it, and it embarrassed him to ask— he knew General Rush would call him a fool for leaving the radio. After the general called him a goddamned fool and ordered the helicopter brought down, Colonel Majeskie went outside to wait. As he watched for the chopper, he noticed his canteen was missing. The very thought that it was missing made him thirsty . . . but not thirsty enough to go back and ask the general for it.

In the Fire Direction Center of "A" Battery, Spec Four Johnson checked his map and re-checked it. He couldn't believe what he had heard on the radio. He picked up the handset.

"Two-one, two-one, this is five-three. Request you check co-ordinates, over."

After a pause, a voice crackled over the radio.

"This is two-one. Have re-checked. Everything OK here. Out."

Spec Four Johnson put down the radio handset and plotted the co-ordinates on the big target map again. He shook his head. But they had to be right -- two of the forward observers and one of the infantry captains had all sent in the same
co-ordinates. He looked again at where they fell. Rong Song. Spec Four Johnson stared in disbelief.

Although he had never heard of the village, it was quite obvious from looking at the map that it was located right in the middle of a big red patch — a no-fire zone. If Rong Song was in a no-fire zone, Johnson thought, then it was considered a friendly village. But the co-ordinates sent in from the field designated Rong Song as the target area. A thousand rounds of artillery would fall there after dark. A friendly village would be annihilated. Spec Four Johnson started to call Lieutenant Morrison over to point out the mistake. But he hesitated. Who would get the shaft if a friendly village was wiped out? He looked at Lieutenant Morrison, sitting in the corner reading a war comic and smoking his pipe. It would have to be the man in charge of FDC, where the data is processed for firing, and that would be Lieutenant Morrison, the bastard who had kept him on double duty since he'd gotten back from the hospital, the bastard who was making him work sixteen hours a day to make up for the time he'd lost "nursing" his feet, which still hurt terribly. He looked again at Lieutenant Morrison propped up in the corner. He chuckled — you smug bastard, he thought, just wait.

Lieutenant Stillman, assigned to work the operation in FDC, walked over to look at the new grid. As he plotted it out, the first thought that came to his mind was that somebody had read his map wrong. But several different officers
had sent the same grid, so it must be right. He looked again at the map. Rong Song was squarely in the middle of a no-fire zone, and thus it was a friendly village. It was a shame, he thought, to shoot all that artillery at a lot of friendly Vietnamese for no good reason.

Then he thought of a reason. Captain Watson's battery would be held responsible, and Captain Watson's ass would be ripped to ribbons. Lieutenant Stillman pictured the captain humbled and whipped and booted out of his precious army, floundering door-to-door selling brushes. He grinned and looked at Spec Four Johnson, who was also grinning. He immediately stopped grinning and ordered Johnson to do so.

At that moment, Captain Watson walked in, accompanied by Lieutenant Galtry. As they entered, Lieutenant Galtry, remembering that someone should call attention when a superior officer entered the room, yelled as loud as he could:

"Aten-shun!"

Maps flew and pencils crunched underfoot, as everyone, including Captain Watson, stiffened to attention.

Captain Watson slowly realized what had happened. He blushed. "At ease," he muttered. He glared at Lieutenant Galtry, as everyone sat down and went back to work. "You don't do that in Viet Nam, you idiot."

Lieutenant Galtry was visibly upset.

"Well, I frankly don't see any reason for slackening discipline, Morley. Now is when we need it more than ever."
He looked around for some sort of approval. No one looked at him. They all acted as if he had never entered the room, except Captain Watson, who called him an idiot again and walked over to the map.

Captain Watson knew that a grid had finally been sent in. General Rush hadn't told anyone where they were until they actually landed, and then he had been reluctant to do so. Captain Watson was anxious to see where the artillery would be shooting.

"Where's the grid?" he asked Johnson.

Spec Four Johnson didn't want to say -- he wanted Lieutenant Morrison hanged for shelling a friendly village.

"Grid, sir?" he asked innocently.

Captain Watson was irritated.

"Yes, the grid. You got a grid, didn't you?"

"Of course, he did," Lieutenant Galtry said firmly.

"Shut up," Captain Watson told him. He turned back to Johnson. Just then, Lieutenant Stillman came over and put his finger on the map.

"Right there, sir."

Everyone looked closely at Lieutenant Stillman's finger.

"Move your finger, Stillman," Captain Watson said, finally.

"I'm trying to show you where we're shooting, sir."

"You're covering up four miles with your finger. Move it!"

Lieutenant Stillman moved his finger. Captain Watson looked closely at the map. It was so damned hard to read
maps without circles on them.

"Put a circle there, Johnson," he ordered.

"Wait a minute!" Lieutenant Galtry thumped him hard on the shoulder repeatedly. "Wait a minute, Morley!" He held up the paper on which Johnson had written the grid, "someone's trying to put one over on you, Morley. Here's the real grid!" He plotted it quickly and showed Captain Watson, who turned to Lieutenant Stillman angrily.

"Why did you tell me the other one, Stillman?"

Lieutenant Stillman shrugged. "I just got mixed up, sir. Maybe you should send me to the field. I don't seem to be very good at this FDC stuff."

Captain Watson looked coldly at him. "I don't want anybody in the field who can't even read a *map*, Stillman."

He turned back to the map. Rong Song. Damn, he thought, that's a friendly village, right smack in the middle of a no-fire zone. He looked first at Spec Four Johnson, then at Lieutenant Stillman. Neither paid any attention. Lieutenant Morrison sat reading in the corner. Captain Watson considered having them all court-martialed. Didn't they care? On the verge of screaming, Captain Watson was suddenly struck by a blinding vision.

Before his amazed eyes danced the whole chain-of-command in its complex entirety. Somewhere along the way, in fact only one notch or so above himself, sat Colonel Majeskie. One step above that was General Rush, the pompous bastard
who wouldn't let him come to the briefing, who wouldn't even
tell him where the operation was, who wouldn't give him any
place on the map to draw his circles, who had, in effect,
cut Captain Watson almost completely out of the war.

So now the general wants to blow hell out of a friendly
village, Captain Watson thought devilishly. Well, well, who
am I to question a general? He grinned. He looked up to
find Lieutenant Stillman and Spec Four Johnson grinning, too.

"Stop that grinning, both of you," he ordered quickly.

"Is there anything wrong with the grid, Morley?"
Lieutenant Galtry asked, looking over the captain's shoulder.
This irritated Captain Watson considerably.

"Shove off!" he snapped. "Go get a haircut or something!"
Lieutenant Galtry was hurt by the rebuke.

"Gee, I was just trying to help, Morley . . . ."

"He was just trying to help, Morley," Lieutenant Stillman
chimed in innocently.

Captain Watson glared at Lieutenant Stillman. Maybe he
could get this bastard canned, too. And Johnson, too, he
thought. And Morrison.

"You're in charge here now, Stillman." He looked at
Lieutenant Morrison, who sat reading his war comic. "You,
too, Morrison." He turned to Spec Four Johnson, who grinned
at him. "You, too, Johnson." He turned and left.

Lieutenant Galtry stayed a moment to talk to Lieutenant
Stillman. "I know you're new at this, Stillman. If you
need any advice . . . ."
"If I need any advice, Larry," Lieutenant Stillman broke in, "I'll write my mother."

Lieutenant Galtry was shaken. He went outside quickly to find the captain.

Captain Watson stood by one of the howitzers and breathed the night air. It was slightly, delicately sprinkled with dust and subtly haunted by the aroma of gunpowder. For the first time, the night and the dust and the powder seemed pleasant and refreshing to Captain Watson. He just might get a foothold in this war after all, by routing a number of the army's dregs with one fell swoop. He found it amazing that no one in FDC had spotted the awful error in the grid. He smiled. By God, if he had to be surrounded by bastards, at least they were dumb bastards, thank God. It made things easier all around.

As he stood blissfully alone in the dusty night air, Captain Watson's tranquillity was rudely shattered by Lieutenant Galtry, who came huffing up behind him.

"What do you suppose Stillman's mother knows about artillery, Morley?" he asked, out of breath.

Captain Watson gritted his teeth. Not this dumb, he thought.

"Shoot, I bet she doesn't know the first thing . . . ."

Slowly and quietly, Captain Watson walked away. He saw his hooch, a dim shadow in the distance. If he ran, he might make it. He ran. He ran like he hadn't run since Ranger School. Once inside, he closed the door and locked it.
Putting his back against it, he closed his eyes and waited. Not a sound. With a great sigh of relief, he sat down at his desk.

Suddenly, the field phone to the PDC rang. Still out of breath, Captain Watson picked it up and listened in horror.

"How could she, Morley? Do you think he was just pulling my leg? Morley?"

Captain Watson put the phone down slowly. He cradled his head in his arms and wished he were back in Ranger School.

General Rush was thoroughly enjoying the operation. While his men were straightening up the mess, Colonel Majeskie's helicopter had made taking off, he set out to stroll through the village.

Like most other Vietnamese delta villages, it had a main section built upon dry, packed ground and surrounded by square rice paddies that were separated from each other by dikes, to facilitate walking from paddy to paddy. Scattered around the main section, where many of the houses stood, were other raised earth platforms, smaller than the main section, each containing a single bamboo and straw house. These little areas were set like islands in the midst of the water-filled paddies.

As General Rush browsed among the houses, picking up odds and ends that struck his fancy, he noticed the sudden scarcity of children. He attributed this to his stern warnings
when they had attacked him as he had left headquarters for his stroll. Surrounding him, they had screamed and tugged at his trousers, begging for hand-outs:

"You give me C-rations, GI? You give me see-grets?"

"I'll give you a kick in the teeth, you little Jap bastards," he had growled at them.

"Ah, you cheap charlie, GI," they had taunted him, until he actually had kicked one of them squarely in the mouth. The children had all scattered, dragging their bleeding friend with them.

General Rush looked around the village, as he fingered a carved ebony Buddha briefly before putting it in his pocket. Strange, he thought. Then he chuckled. He should have thought of kicking the little Japs before this — it did their moral character a lot of good. They always hung around begging, no matter where he went.

He walked outside, feeling the sag of the heavy Buddha in his pocket. There were no children anywhere. In fact, he realized as he gazed around, there wasn't anybody. Only a few minutes before, the place had been teeming with Jap bastards of all ages trying to sell him things he already had in his pockets. Now there was no one in sight.

General Rush walked back to his headquarters hooch. Stepping inside, he called attention for himself. It irritated him at first when no one snapped to attention. Then he realized there was no one in the hooch. He went outside again.
Looking around carefully, all he could see were quiet, empty hooches and mirror-like paddies disappearing among dikes into clumps of bamboo and jungle growth. There was no sound, except the shuffling of a few water buffalo eating hay behind one of the hooches. There was not even the sound of a bird -- they had all been driven away years ago by the bombs and artillery. Away up over Rong Song, General Rush could see Colonel Majeskie's helicopter moving slowly in circles. He started to yell, but the helicopter was too far away. The silence and the disappearance of everybody was eerie. General Rush had heard that the villagers all left when they heard the Americans were in the same area as the VC, but, goddamnit, the VC were in Rong Song, not here. And that still didn't explain why his men would all run away and leave their gear. He made a note to chew their asses out when he found them.

General Rush turned around and went back into the hooch to get a cigarette. To his surprise, everything was gone -- all the maps, the radios, even his cigarettes. They hadn't left their gear.

"Goddamn Japs!" he roared, thinking of the villagers. No wonder they'd all left in a hurry. Sons of bitches would steal anything not tied down. He wondered vaguely if his men had defected. But he couldn't think of it long -- the urge for a cigarette cancelled out all other thoughts.

He wandered out into the village looking for cigarettes. He knew the Japs would have some black-market Winstons hidden
away somewhere. After looking through the last hooch, he sat
down. Sonsofbitches, he thought. As he sat exhausted from
his search and irritable from not having a cigarette, suddenly
he spotted a little clear-plastic bag hanging by a string
above the door of the hooch, blowing gently in the breeze.

General Rush remembered having seen the old men in the
village rolling cigarettes from little bags that looked like
this one. He got up and ripped it from the door. He needed
a cigarette badly.

Opening the sack, he was rather repulsed at what he saw.
The tobacco was dry and greenish and even had little white
seeds mixed in it. Just the sort of cheap shit he would have
expected VC Japs to smoke. He sniffed it. There was hardly
an odor, except for a faintly sweet, woody aroma. He frowned.

General Rush cursed the Vietnamese as a people and sat
down on the hard earthen floor. In the bag, he found several
yellowish cigarette papers. Jesus, the sacrifices of war,
he thought disgustedly.

The cigarette looked weird after he'd rolled it, sort
of crooked and loose. But General Rush had seen hardships
before. As he sucked the hot smoke, he remembered the letter
he'd just gotten from his wife saying she would meet him in
Hawaii on his R & R. The cigarette, although it smelled
funny and burned his throat, wasn't half as bad as that letter.

As he puffed on the strange cigarette, General Rush
thought how incredible it was that the whole village had
vanished so quietly and so quickly. He thought of flying saucers and all the odd disappearances blamed on them. That was the answer, he decided. Since the Air Force ran the damn things, anyway, it wouldn't be too far-fetched to imagine them picking off his whole staff and throwing in a village to make it convincing. General Rush had never liked the Air Force, especially after they had kicked him out of their induction center when he farted in the examining doctor's face as the latter was bent over checking for piles. It was just like the bastards to swoop down and pick up the whole bunch just to get even. They were a vengeful lot of bastards, he thought angrily.

General Rush watched the cigarette burn down to his fingers, then he dropped it. As he followed its fall to the dirt floor, he was amazed that it seemed to take minutes before it bounced and came to rest. General Rush stared at the cigarette as it went out. He felt strange. His head was light. His whole body was light -- it drifted in and around and through itself. It hovered around the ceiling, then floated back into him as he sat watching, amazed.

The incense left burning by the villagers to ward off mosquitoes seemed to fill the air in the room with evocative scents from somewhere far off. It made General Rush think fuzzily of all the places he'd never been: Hong Kong, Melbourne, even Louisville, Kentucky. They all swarmed in his mind and faded into the hazy smell of the incense. General Rush could hardly see through the haze.
He suddenly felt like laughing. But, when he laughed, he saw himself standing by watching the laugh float into the haze. Vaguely, he thought that perhaps he had died. It was his soul standing outside him, laughing softly at the laughter. Or maybe he was still alive, and he had projected himself out of his body. General Rush stared into the haze and didn’t know what to think. He heard the rustlings of the water buffalo outside the hooch. They had moved around to the front of his hooch and were eating straw from the low roof outside the door.

They’re eating the house, General Rush thought. He felt afraid for the first time in his life. The buffalo were eating the house! First they had eaten the Japs, then the general’s personal staff, and now they were eating the houses! He wondered if this was the last house. My God! he thought, suddenly terrified, and huddled into a corner. He could see the slobber drooling from their mouths. One of the buffalo stuck its head in the window and bellowed. General Rush felt the thoughts running heavily through his mind — first the gooks, he thought in horror, then my staff, then the houses, then me!

He wished he could command them to go away, but his voice was frozen with fear. One of the buffalo poked its head in the door and snorted. General Rush’s mind boiled with fragmented pictures of the hideous animals chomping great chunks from his body. Maybe they would choke on the stars, the
bastards, he thought, suddenly very angry.

This last thought roused General Rush out of his timidity. In a flash, as quickly as it had gone, his courage was back.

"Where are they? What have you done with my men, you bastards?" He found himself standing before one of the puzzled buffalo, screaming angrily at it. The room swirled around him. The sun beat the straw-strewn packed front yard into a burnished gold as he looked outside. Bugs of all kind crawled on his neck in combat boots. The room, the hooch, continued to whirl like a merry-go-round.

"Where are my men, goddamnit?" He tried to pry open the mouth of the nearest buffalo. The surprised animal jerked back and bellowed.

"I'll make you talk, you cannibal!" General Rush roared and drew his .45 pistol. He aimed at the bewildered buffalo. His arm waved back and forth. His hand and the gun seemed miles away. He looked long at the hand and the pistol. He couldn't imagine his brain sending impulses through those miles of fog to work the faraway trigger. The gun suddenly leaped out of his hand and tumbled miles through slow space toward the ground. He looked up at the bright blue sky, laced unbelievably with blinding streaks from the yellow sun. Voices carried him. Voices with bodies carried him, trussed up like a deer, tied to a pole. General Rush felt vaguely in the fog of his mind the jarrings of his weightless body as the voices jogged him away across the dikes toward a dark clump of jungle.
Major Phillip Hartley had sat at his desk all morning at Division Headquarters counting off the days until he could go home. He knew he had only seventy-one days left, but, like everyone else in Viet Nam, he got tremendous pleasure in seeing the days laid down small and insignificant on the calendar, vulnerable and tiny and ready to be checked into the past with a flick of his pencil.

Major Hartley was bored with his job as G-3, Division Operations Officer. Nothing ever happened. With the war waning, the Third Brigade was the only fighting brigade left in the division. The others were deployed in base camps or had dwindled to below fighting strength as the Pull-Out crept on. And the Third Brigade, the only operational fighting brigade, hardly ever fought.

It was because of that idiotic Colonel Majeskie, Major Hartley knew. He had only seen Majeskie once, but that had been enough to confirm his opinion that the colonel was worthless as a fighting man and a commander. After trying unsuccessfully to follow a few of Colonel Majeskie's rare field operations on his big division operations map, Major Hartley had given up in dismay. He had been shocked by the lack of organization. Troops wandered through the paddies and jungles at random and were left stranded for days at a time. All the battalion commanders had been killed in what seemed like
senseless ambushes. It had been impossible for Major Hartley to believe that the Third Brigade had once been considered a polished fighting unit. That had been before Major Hartley had come to Division, and it was unbelievable to him that a whole brigade could deteriorate in such a short time.

He had been so shocked, in fact, that he had gone to see Colonel Majeskie.

"Come in," he had heard from inside the colonel's dim office. As he had walked in, Major Hartley had been surprised to find no one in the room. The only light seemed to come from the back window. Squinching his eyes at the dark shadows that filled the room, he had called out, "Sir? Where are you, sir?"

"Under here," he heard a voice say. Still, he saw no one. After a moment, Colonel Majeskie had crawled out from under a big desk that seemed to Major Hartley to be plated with heavy steel — it looked more like a safe than a desk.

"Just picking up something I dropped," Colonel Majeskie had mumbled apologetically. "Sit down, Major." He stretched in his chair, very cramped from sitting under the desk all morning.

Major Hartley had decided to get right to the point.

"Sir," he said, "I wanted to ask you about the brigade. There seems to have been a sharp increase in casualties in the past few months in your brigade."

"Yes, yes," Colonel Majeskie had agreed, nervously eyeing the back window. "The war is getting terrible."
"But that's the problem, sir," Major Hartley had pressed on. "In most areas, the war is slowing down rapidly, and fewer casualties are being taken by those brigades. But your brigade gets slaughtered every time it goes out."

"Someone has to bear the brunt of the burden in every war, Major," Colonel Majeskie had said, philosophically shaking his head.

"But, sir," Major Hartley tried to point out, "our Intelligence reports point repeatedly to the fact that there are fewer and fewer Viet Cong units operating in this area."

He had to tactfully show the colonel where he was in error.

Colonel Majeskie had narrowed his eyes at Major Hartley the way Captain Watson had shown him to narrow them. "If there are so few VC in this area, Major, then how do you account for this brigade's high casualties? Do you think all those men committed suicide?"

Major Hartley had shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

"No, sir, I didn't mean . . . ."

"You think my men aren't careful? Do you realize that this brigade has won the Division Safety Award every month for over a year?"

"Yes, sir," Major Hartley had said, watching the conversation deteriorate as the brigade had: at the hands of Colonel Majeskie. "But, sir . . . that award is for safety in the rear areas . . . ."

Colonel Majeskie had shaken his fist in the air.
"By God, Major, if they don't learn safety in the base camps, how can they expect to use it in the field?"

"Yes, I, uh . . . see your point, sir," Major Hartley had said tiredly.

"Damn right, Major," Colonel Majeskie had gone on. "Damn right they can't. But my men do. We've won that Safety Award every month . . . ."

". . . for over a year," Major Hartley had put in. "I know that, sir, but . . . ." He couldn't think of what to say.

"But what, Major?" Colonel Majeskie had urged.

By this time, Major Hartley had wished he were someplace else. He disliked the colonel and didn't know how Colonel Majeskie had managed to pervert the entire conversation, but he knew it was too tangled to unravel now. He finally had decided just to blurt it out:

"Sir, I think maybe the fault doesn't lie with your men. I think it's a command problem."

Silence had hung over the room and the two officers. Then Colonel Majeskie had spoken, slowly nodding his head.

"I think you may have something there, Major."

Major Hartley had leaned forward eagerly.

"I'm glad you do, sir, because I . . . ."

Colonel Majeskie had raised his hand for quiet.

"It's just not right," he had said, "when so many battalion commanders get killed so quickly . . . ."
Major Hartley had nodded his head vigorously.

"But" — Colonel Majeskie shook his head slowly — "they all seemed like such good officers..."

Major Hartley saw suddenly that the colonel was going to do it again, but he was powerless to stop him. He tried to speak, but Colonel Majeskie silenced him.

"You can never tell, though," Colonel Majeskie had continued, "how a man will react in war. Even strong men break."

He had looked up at Major Hartley. "I just don't see how I got stuck with so many losers in one brigade." He shook his head again.

Major Hartley had wanted to leave. He tried to get up, but Colonel Majeskie had waved him back down and gone on talking. "What I need is some good senior officers, maybe even some majors, who need command time as badly as I need commanders. Some good officers that have been filed away too long in some headquarters somewhere." He had looked at Major Hartley and smiled. "Do you know anybody like that, Major?"

Major Hartley had shaken his head quickly.

Colonel Majeskie had gotten up, still smiling. "Let me go get our roster, Major. You just won't believe the turn-over we've been getting." He had wandered into the back room, and Major Hartley had bolted out the door.

After than, Major Hartley had avoided the colonel carefully. He didn't want to be thrown into the hands of that
maniac and placed like a sacrifice at the head of one of those doomed battalions. So, he had simply kept quiet about Colonel Majeskie, holding his fearful grudge inside him, and had kept plotting Third Brigade's insane missions on the big map, as precisely as insanity can be plotted.

It wasn't that Major Hartley was a coward. He certainly didn't consider himself that. He had fought in Korea as an infantry sergeant and had been given a field commission as a colonel's aide. It really wasn't his fault that he had always been assigned to the staff of a colonel or a general. He had always taken that as a sign of his competence, not his cowardice. Still, he shuddered at the thought of leading one of Majeskie's battalions.

Besides, Major Hartley felt he had done his full duty to war by fighting in Korea. He saw no reason to put his life on the line in a stupid war like this. And it was a stupid war. He didn't doubt that for a moment. The "no-victory" policy rankled him. He didn't like wars where his country wasn't even trying to win. He felt very patriotic most of the time and thought wars should have a noble purpose and be fought for victory. Like Korea. By God, he thought proudly, now that was a war.

Major Hartley sighed as he thought of Korea. He counted his remaining days in Viet Nam and sighed again.

Suddenly, the door opened and one of the operations clerks came in with an envelope.
"Sir, General Rush wanted me to get this to you. It's about an operation today."

Major Hartley was startled and irritated. He was startled that General Rush had scheduled an operation without telling him and it irritated him that he had lost count of the days he was re-counting. He had counted down to twelve days, and now he would have to start over again.

"What about an operation today?" he demanded angrily. General Rush was always doing something like this, and it always startled Major Hartley and irritated him.

The clerk shrugged. "I don't know, sir. He wouldn't say. It's all in here, I guess." He handed Major Hartley the envelope.

Major Hartley took the envelope but didn't open it. "Why the hell didn't General Rush tell me about all this?" He glared at the clerk. "Where is he now?"

"He's already gone, sir," the clerk said.

"Gone? You mean he's gone on the operation already?"

The clerk nodded.

"He said you should plot it all out on the map and keep in touch on the radio."

Major Hartley, still very upset, was even more so after he finished reading the note.

"The Third Brigade?" he moaned, thinking immediately of Majeskie and the lost battalions. "God help us all." He looked at the grid co-ordinates listed as the objective, the
target area. "You get radio contact with the general," he
told the clerk. "I'll plot this grid." He knew General Rush
didn't like anyone knowing where any operation was, so the
Operations section, of G-3, was composed only of Major Hartley
and two clerks, whose job it was to work the radio and who
were forbidden to look at the big map, upon penalty of court-
martial.

Major Hartley plotted the grids the artillery would use
for firing. They all clustered around, and on top of, a
small village. He leaned closer. Rong Song. A friendly
village squarely situated in the middle of a red-outlined
"no-fire" zone. He stood back a moment. Could that be?
Someone was mistaken, he decided. Badly mistaken.

Quickly, he turned to the clerk. "Have you got General Rush yet? I want him to re-check these grids."

The clerk fiddled with the knobs on the radio. "I'm
trying, sir. I'll have him in a minute."

Major Hartley looked back at the map. Rong Song. He
began to think about the mistake. If Rong Song was really
to be the object of a battalion encirclement, and if a Third
Brigade battalion actually did surround it and decimate it
with artillery... what would be the outcome? Rong Song
was a friendly village, and somebody's ass would get hung,
Major Hartley decided. But whose? Surely not General Rush's
-- who had ever heard of a general's ass getting hung? No,
it would probably be the brigade commander, the next man
down the chain of command.
The brigade commander -- Colonel Majeskie.

Major Hartley walked briskly over to the clerk. "Tell General Rush the grids are O.K." The clerk nodded. Major Hartley walked back over to the map and re-checked the grids of the artillery and those marking the positions of the infantry companies. The former still fell on Rong Song, and the latter still formed a circle around the peaceful little village. Peaceful Rong Song. It might just as well be Waterloo, Major Hartley chuckled, remembering his military history. Colonel Majeskie's Waterloo. Major Hartley smiled.

He looked at his watch. Then he called to the clerk.

"Ask General Rush what time the artillery falls on the objective."

The clerk nodded, and, in a minute or so, called back.

"He said tonight after dark."

Major Hartley frowned. He looked at his watch. At least six hours 'til dark. Plenty of time for something to go right and spoil the whole operation. He cursed to himself and looked at the map again.

As the battalion spread out around the village, the people of Rong Song came out to gape at the soldiers. The children swarmed out along the dikes to beg for food and cigarettes. Some of the women loaded up baskets of fruit and black-market bottles of Coke and trudged after the children, hoping to sell their wares to the soldiers.
This annoyed Lieutenant Colonel Burnside, who felt that the whole damned operation was attracting too much attention to ever come off successfully. He called over to his interpreter, a smiling Vietnamese boy of twenty or so. He pointed to the people milling among the soldiers.

"Go tell those people to get back into the village."

It was ridiculous to try to surround the village when all the people were allowed to leave it.

In a few minutes, the interpreter was back, out of breath.

"They do not understand me, sir."

"What the hell do you mean? They don't understand Vietnamese?"

The interpreter looked puzzled.

"Vietnamese?"

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside clenched his teeth.

"Go back and tell the bastards again. In Vietnamese!"

As the interpreter scampered off, Lieutenant Colonel Burnside wished more than ever that he had a helicopter to fly around in. He looked up at Colonel Majeskie's chopper circling low over the neighboring village, preparing to land at General Rush's headquarters. Suddenly, Lieutenant Colonel Burnside hated everything and everybody. Then he remembered that he didn't really hate his wife and kids. He looked up again. Nevertheless, he decided, he wished he had the helicopter and Majeskie had the wife and kids.

"You want buy Coca-Cola?"
He turned around to find a wrinkled old woman holding a basket of Cokes.

"Where'd you get those Cokes?" he asked, narrowing his eyes the way Captain Watson of the artillery had shown him.

The old lady shook her head.

"No talk English," she said. "You want to buy Coke?"

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside knew the Cokes had been black-marketed from some PX somewhere, and it rankled him to think the Vietnamese were getting rich off the war and off the Americans. He eyed the old lady suspiciously. The ragged ballooning pants and the filthy over-blouse didn't fool him for an instant. He knew she had a filthy mattress at home stashed full of GI money.

"Where's your ID?" he asked her angrily.

The old lady shook her head.

"No talk English," she said again. "You want to buy Coke?"

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside knew that all South Vietnamese were required to carry government-issued ID cards, to distinguish them from the Viet Cong. He pulled his .45 pistol.

"You show me your ID, or I'll shoot you right now."

A small boy suddenly rushed up to the old lady and whispered in her ear. She reached in a side pocket and pulled out her ID. She handed it to Lieutenant Colonel Burnside.

He put his pistol away and examined the card. He raised his eyebrows as he read, then he leaned over to look closely at the old woman. "Twenty-seven, my ass," he growled. He
turned around and yelled for one of the infantry captains.

The captain came slogging up. "Sir? You wanted me?"

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside pointed at the old woman. "How old is she, captain?" he asked defiantly.

The captain looked closely at the woman. "Does she have an ID, sir?"

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside sneered and handed the ID card to the captain, who inspected it and then looked up. "Here it is, sir," he said, pointing to a spot on the card. "She's twenty-seven." The captain handed the card back to the old lady, tipped his helmet, and left.

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside looked up in the sky, as the old lady wandered away, hawking her stolen Cokes. Goddamn you, Majeskie, he thought bitterly. Being on the ground during an operation was a degrading thing. It left its mark on a man.

Walking down one of the dikes, Lieutenant Colonel Burnside came suddenly upon Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher, sitting on the dike drinking a Coke, reading the Bible to Lieutenant St. James. "Where'd you get that Coke?" he asked the chaplain sharply.

The chaplain smiled reverently. "From a very nice old Vietnamese lady, Colonel. Would you like a sip? It's very refreshing."

"Don't you know that's a stolen Coke, Chaplain?"

The chaplain gasped. "Oh, no, sir! I paid a whole dollar for it!"
Lieutenant Colonel Burnside fumed.

"Chaplain, what do you think the men will say if they see you drinking Cokes while they have to drink water with iodine tablets?"

"Well, really, sir," the chaplain protested gently. "I think, if you look around, you'll see that most of the men are drinking Cokes."

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside looked around and was horrified. The men lay against, and on, the dikes in groups, drinking cokes. Stolen Cokes! Almost to a man, they were aiding and abetting the enemy. He looked for his interpreter. He had to get rid of the villagers if he was to salvage any semblance of an operation. He yelled for the interpreter.

After a few moments, the interpreter came puffing up the dike. "Yes, sir? You wanted me?" he panted.

"Hell, no," Lieutenant Colonel Burnside frowned, "but they made me take you. Why aren't those people back in the village?"

"They're still selling Cokes and fruit, sir."

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside seethed. He clenched his teeth.

" Didn't you tell them to get their asses back into that village?" he demanded. "How can we surround the bastards when they're spread out all over South Viet Nam?" He was yelling now. "Goddamnit, I told you . . . !"

"I did, I did," the interpreter interrupted defensively. "But they told me I was a puppet of the Americans and to mind
my own business. What could I do?" He smiled and shrugged.

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside was flabbergasted.

"Well, what the hell did you do?"

The interpreter blushed. "I bought a Coke." He held up an empty bottle.

"If those people aren't back in that village in five minutes, I'll have them all shot and you, too!" Lieutenant Colonel Burnside roared.

"Yessir." The interpreter turned quickly and left.

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside stood for a moment staring into the sky where Colonel Majeskie's helicopter was again puttering in circles, high above the absurdity that was engulfing the operation on the ground. He tried to think of his wife and kids.

"You still want buy Coke?"

He turned to find the old lady holding out a Coke, grinning through black, broken teeth.

Closing his eyes, hearing the far-off puttering high above him, Lieutenant Colonel Burnside tried not to think of his wife and kids, because everytime he did, he imagined himself joyfully swapping them for a helicopter.

Barton Halser looked out of the Huey chopper. The wind tugged at the camera around his neck, and he had to grab it to keep it still. He was terribly nervous, but, more than that, terribly excited. It was his first real try at being a war correspondent.
He gazed spellbound at the pock-marked, primitive country sliding by below him. One thing struck him as really scary -- it was certainly a long way from Cleveland.

He sat back and smiled to himself. He hardly believed it was really happening. Out of college only a year . . . and now he was covering a war. An honest-to-God war! He pictured himself speaking to the high school journalism classes around the city on the finer aspects of war correspondence. Yes, Mr. Halser. Golly! Mr. Halser.

The Huey came suddenly over a village, and Barton could see hundreds of tiny figures in mud-green fatigues moving around, forming what looked like a circle around the village, which was nothing but a cluster of thatched huts. It made his heart pound with excitement.

Barton knew very well that he had gotten this assignment only by chance and that he should be grateful. And he was, actually, but from the very moment he had heard Belew had malaria and was coming back to Cleveland, Barton had known it was fate. He visualized his pictures and stories slapped all over the front pages of the Cleveland paper. It was all a young man could hope for.

Of course, being the careful journalist he felt himself to be, Barton knew he must first get the permission of the field commander before actually beginning his work. But, knowing also that the news must go through, the presses cannot be stifled, Barton saw the permission only as a formality.
He couldn't imagine being turned down after he'd come all the way from Cleveland.

"Absolutely not," Lieutenant Colonel Burnside growled.

"But . . . but . . . sir!" Barton stammered.

"No buts! And get yours out of here."

"But, sir," Barton begged, "I came all the way from . . . ."

"I don't care if you came all the way from Cleveland!"

Barton was shocked and bewildered.

"All I want to do is take some pictures and interview some of the men," he pleaded. "I won't get in the way. Please."

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside glared at him.

"You're in the way right now." He couldn't see any useful purpose in having an operation as screwed up as this one reported and photographed, and even his own name probably mentioned.

"But, sir, don't you want your unit to have recognition?"

Barton urged.

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside looked at the men lying around the paddies drinking stolen cokes. He looked back disgustedly at the reporter. "This is no unit of mine, goddamnit," he grumbled and stalked away.

Barton stood looking after him. If he wasn't the commander, who was? He told the helicopter pilot to wait while he looked for the real commander. As he turned away, he heard the pilot curse, and he turned back around just as the helicopter soared out of the paddy in a spray of wind and water.
It almost knocked him down. He staggered to a dike.

Seeing an old Vietnamese lady carrying a basket of cokes, Barton decided to take some pictures. If Burnside wasn't the commander, then he had no right to command. Barton motioned to the old lady.

"You want Coca-Cola?" she asked.

"No, I want to take your picture." He held up his camera.

"No understand English," she said, holding up a coke. "You buy coke, huh?" She smiled at Barton, showing jagged gapped teeth darkened to dirty red by the tons of betelnut she had chewed in her life. Barton caught his breath.

"Do that again," he told her excitedly, aiming his camera at her. He had seen in that one old lady's smile the whole wasted meaning of years of war and oppression. He had to capture it.

The old lady frowned. "Look, you want Coke?"

"Smile, now," Barton coaxed her. "Come on. Just a little smile." He put his camera down and tried to show her how he wanted her to smile. As he stood there grinning, Lieutenant Colonel Burnside walked up.

"She's too old for you," he said after a moment. "She's twenty-seven." He glared at the reporter.

Barton stared at the old lady. Twenty-seven? Oppression and war had made her look sixty-five or seventy. It made him feel sad. He thought of his grandmother, who had been
seventy when she died. She'd looked a lot older than most women of twenty-seven, he remembered. A lot older.

"I thought I told you to get out of here," Lieutenant Colonel Burnside said angrily.

"But my helicopter took off without me . . ." Barton protested.

"Well, then, I suppose you'd better start walking."

Barton was shocked.

"It's a long way back there . . . anyway, you're not the commander," he said bravely, remembering Burnside's denunciation of the unit. "You said you weren't . . . ."

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside pulled his .45 and pointed it at Barton's head. "If I see you around here after about five minutes, you'll have to write your own obituary for that paper." He put his .45 away and walked off through the mud.

Barton's knees gave way, and he sat down on the dike behind him. He didn't know what to do. It would be foolish to try to walk back to base camp: he didn't know the way, and the woods might be filled with VC. There was only one thing he could do -- stay, and try to sneak on a helicopter when it came in. In the meantime, if he kept out of Lieutenant Colonel Burnside's way, maybe way over on the other side of the circle, he could still accomplish his mission. Barton got up and, checking to see which way Burnside had gone, went off in the opposite direction, feeling uncommonly brave and daring.
He didn't stop walking until he had reached the far side of the village, where the troops were closing the circle. A good time, he felt, to record the agonies of war, of men operating under constant strain, spurred on only by love of life and country. He approached a group of men who sat drinking cokes, their rifles laid against the dike where they sat. They all looked up as he approached.

"Say, I wonder," he asked cordially, "if I might talk with you and take some pictures?" He pointed at his camera.

"For some big newspaper?" One of them grinned. "We get paid for it?"

Barton laughed uneasily. "No, you won't get paid . . . ."

"Then we don't want no pictures," the man snapped.

"Oh, hell, Caldwell," a black PFC said, "why not let him make us famous?"

The other man looked at Barton. "You make us famous?"

Barton blushed. "Well, I . . . uh, I suppose . . . in a way . . . ." GI humor made him very uneasy.

The man reached over and jabbed another one in the ribs. "Hear that, Ferg? Sumbitch is gonna make us famous." The other man grunted. "OK, take your pictures," the man named Caldwell told Barton.

Barton was somewhat flustered. The men didn't look like . . . well, they were all sitting around drinking cokes . . . he couldn't . . . he tried to explain: "Well, I, uh, I was hoping for a little more action."
"Ain't that a kick, Ferg?" The man named Caldwell nudged his companion again. "Fella wants to see some action. He oughta come around next time we go to Saigon, huh? Hee-whoo! Right, Ferg?" He jabbed PFC Ferguson, who grinned dumbly. Several of the others chuckled.

PFC Caldwell turned to Barton. "I'll tell you what we can do. You want a little action. How about we get Fergy to shoot himself in the foot?" He grinned and nudged Ferguson, who just grinned again. "How 'bout that, Ferg?"

The other men grinned and egged it on.

"Sure, Ferg, what the hell's a coupla toes?"

"Go on, Ferg, it'll getcha outa this damn mess."

Ferguson grinned and took his M-16 off the dike. He put the switch from automatic to single-shot and pointed it at his foot, still grinning.

Barton was horrified. "Don't!" he yelled. "No!"

Everybody looked at Barton and grinned. He stared back. Would they have let him do it? Were these American soldiers? PFC Caldwell looked at him. "Hell, man, you just blew Fergy's big chance to get outta this mess."

Barton was shocked. "You mean . . . you mean he would have shot himself to be taken out of the war? Crippled himself for life?" Barton couldn't believe these were American soldiers acting and talking this way. "Don't you believe in the war?"

"I believe it's a crock o' shit," PFC Caldwell said. The others all backed him up audibly.
Barton felt dizzy. He tried to remember that these men were weary, were probably shell-shocked. He had to keep hold of himself. He tried again to find within these tired men that spark of original patriotism that glowed through the darkest of times and kept the hearts of Americans warm.

"The VC," he said, "are they fighters worthy of our great nation's efforts?"

"Shit, man," PFC Caldwell snorted. "Them VC can't hold a candle to them bastards in Saigon. Or any place. Hell, they're all VC," he concluded disgustedly.

Barton was shocked again. "You . . . you seem to be equating the VC with the Vietnamese people."

"People?" PFC Caldwell laughed out loud. He nudged Ferguson. "Hear that, Ferg? Sumbitch calling gooks 'people'.'"

"Not people?" Barton squeaked. America, he knew, always loved the nations it liberated, loved them as much as it hated their cruel, communistic enemies. He felt he was dreaming.

"Why, hell, no, they ain't people," PFC Caldwell was saying in the dream. "Just look at 'em sometime. Look at the little slant-eyed bastards. Listen to 'em. They ain't nothin' like people. They squat around on their haunches beggin' for food like damn dogs. Hell, they're all gooks, and gooks ain't no better'n dogs." The others all nodded.

Barton stood up, still in his dream. It had to be a dream. In Cleveland, it would be a nightmare. "I . . . I just can't believe you all feel this way," he stammered. It
was incredible! "Don't any of you want to be here?" he asked desperately.

PFC Caldwell thought a moment. "Yeah, well, Ferg does, 'cause he likes to shoot gooks. I don't reckon the rest of us give a shit about it." He looked around. The men all agreed the war was a load of shit. Fergy grinned dumbly and ran his hand over the barrel of his M-16.

Barton staggered away in a daze. He felt sick at heart. Had he come all the way from Cleveland to find the United States unsupported in his valiant efforts -- by its own men? He stumbled away, looking for a place to sit down and think.

He moved toward a couple of men sitting on a dike just ahead of him. One, he noticed, was a chaplain. Surely, he thought with some relief, a man of God would see the honor in his country's actions. The others had been hardened by the war. They had lost sight of God's purpose for America.

"All wars are detestable, my son," the chaplain told him. "This one is no exception."

"It's insanity," mumbled Lieutenant St. James, who sat beside the chaplain, with a Bible on his lap. He glared at the reporter who had broken up their prayer meeting. "It's a fuckin' nuthouse," he muttered, looking back at his Bible.

"But, Chaplain," Barton protested. "Don't you think God is on our side?"

"Son," the chaplain said softly, "I don't think the good Lord interferes much in the real fighting of wars. They are
of our own making. He uses them only as tests of our faith," he said, thinking of his own impending test. "God's real battlefield is within each of us," Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher told the reporter. "Not between nations." He smiled reverently and went back to pointing out Bible verses for Lieutenant St. James.

Walking, dazed, to the next paddy, Barton had the distinct impression he was really caught in the filmy web of a dream. And it was a dream he'd had before. In it, he was first summoned, as a reporter, to cover a rape case. Filled with excitement, he would rush to the scene, a local bar, to find an angry prostitute griping because her customer ran out without paying. Secondly, he would again be called to cover a story, this time to snap dramatic pictures of a man jumping from a twenty-seventh floor ledge. When he would get there, he would find that the man perched high above the city was a window-washer.

A tap on the arm broke him out of his dream.

"Can't you find your way home?" Lieutenant Colonel Burnside asked nastily.

This was the man, Barton thought suddenly. If any man could save it all, could bring back the meaning of it all . . . "Sir," Barton asked hopefully, frantically, "sir, you like the war, don't you?"

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside looked at the reporter. He thought of Colonel Majeskie's chopper. He looked down at

Barton sat down in the paddy. He felt all alone in a strange land.

"You still want buy Coke?" the old lady asked from behind him.

General Rush woke up tied to a tree. He was still drowsy from the strange cigarette. Jesus, he thought, no wonder those Jap bastards act so crazy all the time, smoking that cheap tobacco.

He tried to reach up and scratch his nose and noticed for the first time that he was tied up. The fact shocked him a little. He could never remember being tied up before. It was uncomfortable. He looked around. All he could see were dark, tangled limbs bent over at their tops to form a sort of canopy over the wet, grassy clearing where he sat. Looking up, he could see flickers of daylight darting through the limbs, so he knew it was still day-time.

General Rush's first impression of his situation was that someone was playing a trick on him. And whoever it was, the Air Force or the Jap kids or whoever, they would pay when he got loose. But, as he sat on the wet grass and felt the ropes cutting off the blood to his hands, he began to wonder if perhaps he'd actually been captured. He snorted.
Generals don't get captured. Still, he had to admit, this was one hell of a bold trick to play on a general.

Suddenly, General Rush heard voices in the black woods around him. They seemed to be coming closer, advancing through the tangle of jungle limbs that walled in the clearing. General Rush wondered if his captors were coming back. He had never seen a Viet Cong before, but he supposed they must look like all the other Japs in Viet Nam.

As he pondered all this, General Rush saw the dense vines to his right part and a short, dark Vietnamese boy of about fourteen crawled into the clearing, dragging an American M-16 rifle. He was followed by another. Then, under the unintelligible proddings of the two Vietnamese, out slithered all four of General Rush's aides, having considerable difficulty moving on their stomachs in the mud, their hands tied behind them. After they had all grunted and slopped their way into the little clearing, a third Vietnamese emerged, taller and older than the other two.

"You will co-operate with us," the tall man said to General Rush. "Or your officers will be killed." He spoke impeccable English, making the general look into the jungle to see if there was a ventriloquist hiding somewhere.

The aides looked bug-eyed at each other, tired and scared. Then they all looked at General Rush, aware that their lives hinged on his answer.

"Like hell I'll co-operate," General Rush told them. He was relieved to find the VC identical to every other under-
nourished slopehead he'd seen.

The English-speaking Vietnamese spoke sharply and unintelligibly to the other two. Then he shouted into the woods. Two more dark little men appeared, carrying rifles. They grabbed one of the startled officers and dragged him into the woods. A shot was heard and a muffled scream, almost a grunt. The remaining officers looked at each other wild-eyed. Then they looked at General Rush.

"You will co-operate now?" the tall man asked General Rush, smiling cruelly and exposing a gold tooth.

General Rush was getting angry. "You think you can scare me?" he growled. "I'm a general in the United States Army, you Jap bastard."

Another sharp command from the tall man, and the second officer was carried off. Another shot, another grunt. The last two officers looked at each other. Captain Renfro, one of them, began to cry. The other, Major Pearson, looked at him disgustedly and turned away.

"Now, General?" the tall man asked, smiling goldenly.

General Rush had heard about the savagely-shrewd Oriental systems of mental torture. He was proud to think he could endure it.

"You'll find that we don't break that easily, Nip," he said defiantly.

The tall man turned and barked an order. Captain Renfro was dragged away whimpering. The last officer, Major Pearson, glared coldly at the general.
"For God's sake, General, what the hell are you trying to prove?" he asked angrily, more than a hint of fear in his voice.

General Rush looked at the major disgustedly. It was an unpleasant surprise to find Pearson one of the weak ones. It takes a test like this, he concluded.

"Get some backbone, Pearson," he ordered, as the tall man snapped his fingers, and Major Pearson was hauled away cursing. A shot and a grunt, and the woods became deathly still.

The tall man pulled General Rush's .45 pistol and stuck it against the general's head. "Well, General?" he asked.

General Rush felt the wet barrel pressing against his temple. The man seemed to be intent on following through with his threat. These people were so damned irrational, General Rush concluded, that it was senseless to argue with them.

"There's been enough bloodshed, already," he told the man, who put away the pistol and smiled.

"You are very wise, General," he said. "Come with me." After a sharp order from the tall man, General Rush was untied and led out of the tiny, enclosed clearing into a larger clearing in the middle of more jungle growth and bamboo. He could see by the dropping sun that it was late afternoon, almost dusk.

"Use your radio," the tall man told him, pointing to a radio taken from one of the aides. "Call that helicopter
and tell them to come down and pick you up." He pointed high over Rong Song toward Colonel Majeskie's helicopter.

General Rush looked carefully to be certain he was seeing what he was supposed to. Majeskie's chopper? He looked at the tall man and then back into the sky. Hell, he thought, if I'd know that was all they wanted . . . .

"Tell him to land where we throw out smoke," the tall man said as General Rush picked up the radio handset. General Rush wondered vaguely what the Japs wanted with Majeskie. They were all such crazy bastards, and so was Majeskie -- maybe they wanted him as a VC. General Rush chuckled. If all the VC were Majeskies, we could've won the war by a nasty telephone call, General Rush chuckled to himself. He rather hoped Majeskie would join the VC and teach them all he knew about warfare -- it would set the bastards back forty years.

"Papa One, Papa One," he said into the handset. "This is Buzzard One." He muttered his own call sign. It always embarrassed him a little to be a general and have a call sign like "buzzard." It was especially humiliating to have the Japs hear it.

Colonel Majeskie answered back, and the general ordered him to come down.

"Where are you?" Majeskie answered.

"I'm down here in the woods, goddamnit," General Rush told him. "Now get down here."
Colonel Majeskie looked all around the countryside below him. He saw no sign of General Rush. He wondered what the general would be doing wandering around in hostile woods. Had he taken his staff with him and changed his headquarters?

"Buzzard, this is Papa," he said. "Who's with you?"

General Rush turned to the tall man.

"This bastard wants to know your name."

The tall man was taken aback.

"Name?"

"Hell, yes -- name," General Rush said. "The dumb bastard won't come down unless you tell him your name."

The tall man refused. General Rush shrugged and dropped the hand set and folded his arms. "Have it your way," he said.

The tall man, still confused, blurted out a name.

"Ho Binh," he said, doubting that the general would realize it was a fake. He was relieved when the general nodded and picked up the handset.

"It's Ho Binh," he said to Majeskie. "Now get your ass down here."

Colonel Majeskie was startled. He asked the pilot who Ho Binh was. The pilot didn't know, but he said it sounded Vietnamese. Suddenly, the old terror sprang up in Colonel Majeskie's mind. Snipers. His heart nearly stopped. Suppose General Rush had defected and was trying to lure him into an ambush?

The general's voice crackled through the radio.
"Watch for smoke on your right, Majeskie. Identify the color."

The tall man tossed a U.S. smoke grenade on the ground. The smoke rolled out in a great pink cloud and billowed into the air.

Colonel Majeskie watched the smoke rising out of a clearing far below him. He knew that the standard procedure was for a helicopter to identify the color before landing, to make sure the VC hadn't popped a smoke, too. It could be devastating to land in the middle of a VC unit. But Colonel Majeskie didn't relish the idea of landing at all, especially in a little clearing way out in the middle of the jungle. He called the general.

"I don't see any smoke."

General Rush was mortified.

"Like hell! Look down, you idiot!"

Colonel Majeskie looked down again. The smoke was lifting higher and higher in great pink clouds. It terrified Colonel Majeskie.

"Sorry," he said into the radio. "Still can't identify."

General Rush was fuming. He turned to the tall man.

"Give me that gun, goddammit." He snatched the M-16 from the man's hands and aimed, before anyone could stop him, at Colonel Majeskie's chopper. The four other Vietnamese men stood by with their mouths open.

General Rush aimed carefully. He shot. The helicopter
was much too far away, and the bullet vanished into the huge sky. General Rush cursed and handed the man's rifle back to him. He thought a moment. If he could just get Majeskie to fly lower . . . then, if the bastard said he couldn't see anything, at least he'd be within range. He grabbed the handset.

"Majeskie, fly lower and looked for that damned smoke!" he growled into the radio.

The Vietnamese men talked rapidly among themselves. The tall man smiled at the others and spoke enthusiastically. Occasionally, they would all gesture at the general and nod vigorously.

Colonel Majeskie was petrified. He could see his life rubbed out by a sniper as clearly as he could see the smoke boiling up from the jungle. Sweat rolled in rivulets down his neck. For the first time since he had left his office, Colonel Majeskie was scared. The war had been so simple from a thousand feet up. He looked down and shuddered.

The pilot, who had wanted to fly lower all day, was already dropping the chopper toward the smoke. He had heard the order, and he knew a colonel would cross a general, so he happily nosed the chopper down, almost in a dive.

Colonel Majeskie's heart was in his throat as the helicopter plunged rapidly down to several hundred feet. All right, he decided, he can make me fly lower, but he can't make me see any smoke. As long as I don't see the smoke,
I don't have to land, he thought desperately as the swirls of pink from the new grenade swallowed the chopper.

"See that, Majeskie?" General Rush's voice roared out of the radio.

Colonel Majeskie closed his eyes, so he wouldn't have to lie anymore. "I don't see a thing. Over." The pilot kept punching him and yelling "Pink!" but Colonel Majeskie kept his eyes closed and pretended to have dozed off.


The bullet ripped open the gas tank. The pilot's eyes went wide as he saw the gas gauge dropping and looked around to see a stream of fuel pouring out into the air. He yelled at Colonel Majeskie and punched him on the arm.

"We've been hit! We'll have to land before the whole damned thing blows!"

"Hit? Hit?" Colonel Majeskie was near panic. The nightmare come true! The laundry sniper following him to the field. The chopper whirling away in a puff of smoke. A parachute! Maybe he had a parachute! He reached back and pulled his pack around on his lap, as the chopper cut crazy patterns to keep from crashing. Colonel Majeskie could scarcely control his fingers as he tore open the pack. Oh God, he thought,
let there be a parachute! Finally, his fingers almost bloody from tearing, Colonel Majeskie got the pack open.

He stared for several moments at the gear Corporal Hanes had packed. Then he closed his eyes sadly and waited for the chopper to explode into the jungle. He knew the rescuers who found his body would make crude jokes about his pack and wonder what a white colonel was doing with a copy of *Soul on Ice* and two pairs of sunglasses and a framed picture of Aretha Franklin. But it wouldn't matter then. He sighed.

Suddenly, the pilot had him by the arm and was jerking him out of his seat. Colonel Majeskie opened his eyes. They were in the middle of a water-filled rice paddy.

"Come on!" the pilot yelled. "It's gonna blow!"

Colonel Majeskie was stunned with relief. He had met a sniper . . . and survived. He ran toward the woods in a daze.

The chopper exploded into a thousand flying pieces when the gas had sufficiently saturated the engine.

The Vietnamese men had watched incredulously as the chopper had dropped out of the sky. When they heard the explosion and saw the smoke drifting and boiling over the trees, they cheered and grinned at General Rush and clapped their hands.

General Rush picked up the handset.

"See any smoke now, Majeskie?" he growled.

There was no answer.
Colonel Majeskie sat terrified behind a dike, imagining brigades of snipers peering out of the woods behind him.

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside watched bitterly as Colonel Majeskie's chopper dropped into the woods. He was too far away to hear the explosion and assumed the colonel was taking a break. In fact, it seemed to him that Majeskie spent most of his time on the ground. He probably had a girlfriend out there and was giving her rides in the helicopter. It infuriated Lieutenant Colonel Burnside, and he paced up and down a paddy dike, clenching his fists. He damned sure wouldn't have that chopper on the ground. Hell, no! He'd be all over that battlefield — zoom! zoom! zoom!

But he wasn't up there. He was down in the mud. It rankled him. Goddamn, it wasn't fair!

He turned angrily to his radio operator.

"Hinkle, get Majeskie on there."

After a few tries without an answer, finally Colonel Majeskie's voice crept out of the radio, small and scared.

"Majeskie," Lieutenant Colonel Burnside said furiously, "if you can't keep that goddamned helicopter in the air, give it to somebody who can!"

Colonel Majeskie's voice froze. The static on the radio had blurred Burnside's voice just enough to make it a garbled sort of growl, exactly like General Rush's voice without static. Oh my God! he thought in horror. General Rush had seen him go
down. He gulped and looked over the dike at the burning pieces of the helicopter and the oily smoke curling out of the paddy. A thousand pairs of slanted eyes peered at him from the woods at his back. His stomach started to hurt. He wished he could go back and take his chances with the sniper outside his office. He longed to see the bare-breasted laundry girls.

Slowly, Colonel Majeskie put down the radio handset and stared at it. There was no doubt the voice had belonged to General Rush -- he was the only man who ever said "Goddamn" on the radio. Colonel Majeskie groaned. He turned to the pilot, who was sadly watching his helicopter smoulder away.

"Where can I get another helicopter?"

The pilot looked at him strangely. A warrant officer, young but experienced, the pilot had thick red hair that fell over his eyes. He spoke with a Georgia drawl.

"Well, ackshully," he began, "I don't see as how we can . . . ."

Colonel Majeskie's heart flopped over. He grabbed the pilot's arm and shook it. "We have to!" he said desperately. "We have to!"

The young pilot pulled away nervously. He didn't like men grabbing him and didn't plan to be taken advantage of by a middle-aged colonel. He frowned.

"Now, look, Colonel, the only choppers up there are the gunships, and I don't think they'll give you a ride."
Colonel Majeskie saw the two Cobra gunships soaring in circles, the vicious teeth painted on them showing even at several hundred feet. They circled lazily, waiting for the call to strike. Colonel Majeskie watched them. Could he? Sweat poured from his face. Had anyone ever highjacked a Cobra? But, did he have a choice? He thought of General Rush on the radio saying he would give the chopper to someone else. He thought of the brigade of squinting eyes in the woods behind him and shuddered. He would be on the ground if he didn't get some sort of helicopter, running fruitlessly from the brigade of hidden eyes. Hopelessly.

Quickly, Colonel Majeskie grabbed his radio handset. He called the Cobra gunships and ordered them to set one of their ships down.

A stream of unintelligible curses spewed out of the radio. Colonel Majeskie wiped his brow nervously.

"I'll throw out smoke and you identify. Okay? Over."

"Horseshit," the reply came back. "Over."

"I order you to come down!" Colonel Majeskie yelled, trying to sound authoritarian. "This is my operation, by Gosh!"

"Look, Colonel," the gunship pilot radioed back, "this is my helicopter, and we're up here to shoot, not to park."

Colonel Majeskie thought quickly. Then he remembered the sniper-laden woodline behind him.

"All right," he said into the handset. "Shoot up that
woodline behind us and then come down." Colonel Majeskie congratulated himself on killing two birds with one stone. He felt so good that he thought for a moment of calling the gunships in on General Rush. The thought made him smile.

"Horseshit. Over," the pilot radioed back.

"Get down here this instant! Over," Colonel Majeskie fumed.

"Huh-uh. Over," the pilot said.

Colonel Majeskie wracked his brain. Then he hit on an idea. "If you come down here," he said into the handset, "I'll let you strafe the village."

There was silence a moment. Then the pilot spoke:

"Promise?"

"I'm a colonel, aren't I?" Colonel Majeskie said indignantly. He had a smoke grenade thrown out. After some hesitation, one of the gunship pilots identified the smoke and started down. The other, more familiar with colonels, took off to the west, saying he needed to re-fuel.

Colonel Majeskie watched nervously as the gunship came down. The realization of what he was doing struck him suddenly: hijacking a U.S. Army Cobra gunship, complete with rockets and machine guns and all. How could he do it? Did he really think he could fool General Rush by flying around in a gunship? And how, how, how could he do it? He wished he'd never called them down. But what alternative? To walk among the snipers until he was cut down and left bleeding in the mud? Oh, Lord, he wished the chaplain were there. He
wished . . . he even wished for one wild moment that the gunship would be shot down! He knew he couldn't go through with it. But he had to. His stomach ached.

As Colonel Majeskie watched, like a cornered rabbit staring hypnotically at a coiled rattlesnake, unable to move, the gunship suddenly dropped from the air and fell fifty feet into the paddy. It lay on its side sputtering, the big overhead propeller slapping the mud. The crew came piling out and ran for cover behind the dike. The pilot cursed and kicked at the dike.

Colonel Majeskie never heard the pilot cursing at him. He was too busy watching the dying gunship.

General Rush turned around angrily and grabbed the M-16 from the tall man's hands. "What in the hell did you do that for?"

The tall man looked at General Rush, perplexed. Only a few minutes before, it had been the general shooting down helicopters. Now he was mad because someone else had shot one down. Whose side was he on? the tall man wondered.

"Whose side are you on, you Jap bastard?" General Rush roared. He stopped short, suddenly remembering.

The tall man, in the same instant, remembered too. The other men remembered.

Everyone stood looking at each other a moment.
The tall man suddenly dove into the woods, barking an order. But before the others could shoot or jump for cover, General Rush opened up on full automatic and sprayed them with all eighteen rounds left in the magazine. They fell and lay squirming and bleeding on the ground. The tall man slumped out of the viny bushes, blood dripping from his mouth. He looked up at General Rush and gasped in impeccable English:

"Traitor!"

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside watched the gunship disappear behind the distant trees where Colonel Majeskie's chopper had gone down minutes before. He saw smoke lifting out of the trees. The bastards must be having a barbecue, he thought bitterly.

General Rush, disgusted with the whole fiasco, called a helicopter to come and take him back to base camp. How could he run a successful operation with a clown like Majeskie in command? And who would carry his radio now that his staff had deserted him? He just wanted to get back to headquarters and have a drink and a shower. Maybe he'd get Roxie, the Donut Dolly, to give him a massage. General Rush chuckled as he thought about it. Maybe he could salvage the afternoon, despite Majeskie and his cowardly staff. He thought of Roxie and smiled.
Colonel Majeskie waited quite a while before calling General Rush. He watched the gunship long after it had ceased sputtering. He felt the eyes of the Cobra pilot boring into his back. They really didn't bother him -- he was accustomed to the sinister eyes of Viet Cong snipers watching his every move. What worried him unbearably was what he could tell General Rush. Not only his own chopper, but now a gunship -- the general would never understand. Colonel Majeskie, himself, didn't understand. He wished the chaplain were there.

At last, he gave up all hope and mentally kissed Madeleine and the kids goodbye and called General Rush on the radio. To Colonel Majeskie's utter astonishment and delight, there was no answer. Cautiously, he tried again. Still no answer. Colonel Majeskie felt like laughing aloud. By God, he didn't need the chaplain! He was blessed! Wondering briefly if General Rush had perhaps been killed, Colonel Majeskie boldly called a big Chinook helicopter to lift the fallen Cobra.

Then, in as brave an act as he had ever perpetrated, he ordered another chopper for himself.

He tried to avoid looking at the Cobra pilot as the latter tramped angrily aboard the Chinook with his crew and made vulgar gestures at the colonel out of the window of the Chinook. The big chopper lifted off, hauling by a cable and hook the dead gunship.
Colonel Majeskie sighed a big sigh of relief as he watched the gunship lifted away. Alone with his pilot and door-gunners, he felt like a charmed man. He smiled and waited happily for his new helicopter, feeling quite proud of himself for being successfully shot down. In a few minutes, he would be soaring again above the battlefield, a hardened veteran commander, sure of his command, steady in his leadership.

Suddenly, he thought of the snipers behind him. Thousands of unseen eyes watched his every move and waited to end his great moment of glory. Colonel Majeskie drew his head into his collar and hunkered down behind the dike. As he sat in the muddy water, he felt a cold coming on. He shuddered, half from the cold, half from the piercing eyes at his back. He wished he were in his helicopter.

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside watched incredulously as one after another chopper went down into the woods and came back out. What kind of damned circus was going on over there? he wondered. First, he had seen Majeskie go down. Then a gunship. Then a Chinook cargo chopper had disappeared into the woods and had come out carrying Majeskie's helicopter. Then two more choppers had vanished and come out again, one circling over the operation, the other heading back toward base camp. Incredible, simply incredible, thought Lieutenant Colonel Burnside. He wondered if there was some giant crap
game over in the woods, with helicopters in the pot.

Glaring at the helicopter flying overhead, he knew it was Majeskie again, buzzing like a shit-fly over the mess below. Lieutenant Colonel Burnside wished for a moment that he could be an unscrupulous Viet Cong with a good eye and a strong rifle.

"Last chance, GI!" He turned around. The old lady with the bad teeth was holding her last Coke out to him. He pushed her off the dike and was drawing back his boot to kick her when he noticed the reporter trying to take pictures of him. He walked over and kicked the reporter instead.

Private Tommy Bing was petrified. For eleven-and-a-half months he had gone on operations and had done his fair share of shooting and being shot at. He had even been recommended once for a bronze star for valor, but somewhere along the line the citation had been lost. Rumor had it that Colonel Majeskie had kept it, but no one knew for sure. Private Bing had been disappointed, but he had always felt a soldier's job was rewarding in itself, without medals and such things. He had been proud to be a part of the Great Cause.

Until now.

With sixteen days left in Viet Nam, Private Bing was terrified.

He had always understood that a man with less than a month left in-country was automatically taken out of the
infantry and re-assigned to a secure rear area. When his "short-timer" calendar reached the 30-day mark, he had let out a sigh, smiled broadly and had proudly shook the hands of all the men in his squad. He had done his job, and he was out of the field! For over eleven months Private Bing had suffered and fought and lain awake all night listening to the artillery. He had gone weeks without showers and had eaten hundreds of cans of C-rations, cold and flavorless. Proud though he was to have done his country's duty, he was a happy man when the thirty days loomed out at him from the calendar. The magic number -- thirty!

He had been assigned on that magic night to CQ duty, a job which required only that he be awake all night to be sure no one burned down the orderly room. Private Bing hoped it would be his last job with the infantry. He had already packed his bags to go back to a rear area. Staying awake all night would be no problem -- he was too excited to sleep.

"She sure is beautiful, isn't she, sir?" He had shown Lieutenant Cartwright, the young infantry officer on duty, his personal and sacred autographed picture of Loretta Lynn. "When I get home, that's the first thing I want to do -- get on a plane and go straight to Nashville. I'm gonna get me a seat at the Grand Ole Opry and just stare at her all night. Boy, she sure is somethin'."

Lieutenant Cartwright had looked dully at the picture and yawned. "Yeah, she's a hot dog, Bing."
"Yessir," Private Bing had gone on undaunted, "for the next thirty days I'm just gonna lay up in my bunk and dream about that sweet woman. Yessir, just dream about her for thirty days and thirty nights."

Lieutenant Cartwright had snorted.

"Yeah, if we don't have any operations. Which we probably won't with this chickenshit outfit."

Private Bing had just smiled.

"Well, sir," he had said confidently, "even if there is an operation, I don't guess I'll be going. I just got thirty days."

Lieutenant Cartwright had snorted again.

"That don't mean shit, Bing. Thirty days or thirty years -- it don't mean shit."

Private Bing had been startled.

"Oh, no, you don't understand, sir -- guys with just thirty days left don't have to go out in the field. That's a regulation. Thirty days."

"Fifteen," Lieutenant Cartwright had said shortly, yawning.

Private Bing had frozen. Could it be? It couldn't . . . it just couldn't. "I . . . I . . . I don't think . . . ."

"Fifteen, Bing," Lieutenant Cartwright had repeated. He was sleepy at the time and didn't want to argue. "Go look it up."

Private Bing had quickly gotten out the USARV regulations, which covered all U.S. troops in Viet Nam. Thumbing through
it frantically, he had finally found the right page. He had read silently a minute, his lips moving slightly. Then he had stopped. Quietly and slowly, he had put the book up and gone back to his chair, where he sat down and stared at the floor.

"Fifteen?" Lieutenant Cartwright had asked.

Private Bing, sitting almost stone-still in a trance, had nodded dumbly.

"Ah, what the hell, Bing," Lieutenant Cartwright had said, yawning. "Not much chance we'll be goin' anywhere soon. It's been a long time." He had paused a moment. "'Course, you might look at it another way and say we're due for an operation." He shrugged. "Ah, what the hell? Look, Bing, I'm goin' back in the back room and get some sleep. You get tired, wake me up. I'll be on that cot back there."

Private Bing had nodded vacantly as the lieutenant went out. He reached over and took the picture of Loretta from the desk. The sweetheart of country music, and he might never see her again. With no girlfriend at home, Loretta had been all that had kept him going for eleven months. And now he was going to die. And all because of a stupid regulation! Tears had filled his eyes as he gazed at the picture. He was scared. He held back the tears and kissed Loretta goodbye. Then he sobbed all night.
For the next two weeks, Private Bing had sweated blood waiting for the inevitable operation to come and blot out all his dreams. And, two weeks from that night, sixteen days before he was to go home, Private Bing found himself in the middle of a rice paddy, up to his knees in an operation.

And he was petrified. With one day to go before he could leave the field, he was scared. With every step he took farther and farther into the dreaded operation, his hopes of ever seeing his country queen were trampled deeper and deeper into the mud.

Huddling against a dike, Private Bing had watched his squad bait the reporter. Now, he huddled alone, away from the squad. One thought kept him going: if he could stay alive for one more night, he could go back to safety for good the next day. One more night. He shivered in terror as he hunched his shoulder into the dike.

"You want buy Coca-Cola, GI?" He looked up to see an old lady standing over him on the dike, holding out a coke and grinning through dirty red and black teeth.

"N-n-n-no," he stammered. He looked at the bottle the old lady held and thought he could see pieces of cut glass sparkling in the inside of the bottle. "Go away!"

The old lady frowned and walked away.

Private Bing felt a hand on his arm. He almost leaped over the dike.

"Hey, Bing, hey, hold on there." It was PFC Caldwell, who had given the reporter such a rough time. "C'mon, Bing,
this ain't no place to be. The rest of the squad's way over yonder. C'mon." He tugged on Bing's arm futilely. "C'mon, Bing -- we gotta get ready to watch for them Viet Congs."

Private Bing looked up, his eyes wide.

"I'm w-w-watching," he said quickly and opened his eyes even wider. "I s-s-sure am w-watching, Vernon."

PFC Caldwell smiled.

"C'mon, Bing. I know you only got sixteen days left -- hell, man, come on back where we can protect you."

Reluctantly, Private Bing got up and went with PFC Caldwell. He hated to do it, because he knew that when men clustered in groups, they were much more likely to be shot at, as they presented a bigger target. He decided he would watch for his chance to sneak away from the squad after dark.

"Hey, Bing, you ain't very social," Rogers said: He was a PFC and black, and although he sympathized with Bing, he still enjoyed teasing him. All the men did. Bing was so vulnerable. "You better stay with us, Bing," Rogers grinned. "Those VC gonna eat you alive if you go wanderin' off."

PFC Caldwell sneaked up behind Bing and grabbed him suddenly around the neck and yelled. "You die, GI!"

Private Bing's eyes nearly popped out of his head. He shrieked in terror.

The squad roared. Then they all went back to cleaning their rifles and talking about Saigon massages and how spooky Bing was with only one day left in the field.
Private Bing sat against a paddy dike, his eyes closed, his heart pounding, and knew he could never last the night.

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside was disgusted. He was certain that some of the villagers had escaped into the woods. There had been so damned many of them running around the paddies selling cokes and begging that he couldn't be sure which ones had gone back to the village and which ones hadn't. He thought of sending a squad into the village to check, but all the gooks looked so much alike that it would be useless. He decided instead to send a squad into the woodline behind them to round up any that had sneaked away. Jesus! Two hours they had been here -- two short hours -- and already he was sure some of the enemy had slipped away . . . in broad daylight! The coke-selling routine had been a cover. Lieutenant Colonel Burnside shuddered when he thought of all the men who had bought the cokes like a bunch of damn dumb kids, while the gooks flocked en masse into the woods. It made his stomach hurt.

"What're we lookin' for, sir?" Corporal Haber asked.

"Gooks. Right, Colonel?" PFC Kennedy put in.

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside nodded, feeling his stomach twitch. He wished he'd never asked the men to go.

"Friendly ones or unfriendly ones?" Corporal Haber asked.

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside looked at the man vacantly. He was tired. "They can't be real friendly if they're hiding
in the woods, can they?" he replied flatly. He watched dis-
gustedly as the men tramped through the paddy toward the
woodline, talking and laughing like schoolkids on their way
to a ballgame. He looked at his new battalion. Coke bottles
lay everywhere. The men, most of them in position around
the village, were chattering and opening C-ration cans and
smoking cigarettes. He sat down tiredly on a dike, hearing
above him the faint puttering of Colonel Majeskie's chopper,
circling aimlessly like a lazy fly over a heap of new dung.

"We s'posed to shoot 'em, Habe?" PFC Kennedy asked when
they go into the woods.

"Hell, I don't know. I guess so. Why? Don't you want
to shoot 'em?"

PFC Kennedy shrugged.

"Yeah, I guess so."

"How about you, Larse?" Corporal Haber asked the machine
gunner.

PFC Larsen grinned and pointed his M-60 at the surrounding
bushes and made a sound like a machine gun firing. "Yeah.
Why not? Get rid o' some o' them bastards. Man, I almost
got sick off that hot Coke."

"It's barbaric."

The men all turned around to see who had spoken.

"It's tragic and barbaric," said Spec Pour Reynolds, the
medic, who was an avowed conscientious objector.
The men groaned.

"What the hell are you doin' here?" Corporal Haber asked, annoyed.

"It's abhorrent the way you men have no respect for human life." He spoke slowly, like a record on the wrong speed.

"You high again?" Corporal Haber asked, peering closely.

Spec Four Reynolds swayed gently. His eyes were glassy.

"Hell, yes, he is," said PFC Kennedy. "Why don't you go on back to the battalion, Reynolds?"

Spec Four Reynolds shook his head deliberately. "I want to be a witness in case there are atrocities."

PFC Kennedy glared at the medic.

"I'm glad they don't let you carry a gun, you bastard -- you're crazy as hell."

Corporal Haber grinned. "Aw, he's harmless. Come on, let's go find some gooks."

The handful of men spread out and wandered through the thick brush and wet, swampy grass. For an hour, they combed the woods without finding anyone. They came back together in a clearing and took off their gear and laid their rifles down. They were tired and muddy and hadn't found anything.

"Say, Habe," PFC Kennedy said after they'd all gotten back their breath, "why don't we just set out some booby traps, in case them gooks come sneakin' back in here after we leave?"
Corporal Haber nodded. "Now, that's not a bad idea. Got any C-4? Grenades?"

"Damn right I got grenades," PFC Kennedy said. He reached down and picked up his belt. "Hey!" He looked at his belt in amazement. "Hey! They're gone! I had three frags hung on my belt!"

PFC Larsen snickered.

"You'd lose your ass if it wasn't stuck on." He picked up his own gear and looked at it in surprise. "Hey! I had a coupla frags stuck right in here!"

Suddenly, all the men were frantically checking their packs and pistol belts. No one had a grenade or any of the C-4 explosive.

Corporal Haber was astonished.

"Well, just where in hell did they all go?"

They all quickly looked through the nearby bushes, cursing and muttering. Finally, Spec Four Reynolds sauntered into the group and watched them a moment before speaking. "You won't find them in there, either."

The men looked around and straightened up.

"Where are they, Reynolds, you sonofabitch?" PFC Kennedy asked angrily. They all glared at the medic and waited.

"I threw them away," he said cheerfully.

"You what?" PFC Kennedy yelled.

"I threw them away."

PFC Larsen started towards him.
"Why, you Commie bastard, I'll . . . ."

"Hey, you, GI!" a voice came from the woods.

The men looked around. A small Vietnamese boy emerged from the woods, holding a grenade.

"You want buy grenade?" he asked innocently.

They all looked at Reynolds, who swayed and smiled.

"You bastard," muttered PFC Larsen.

PFC Kennedy shifted nervously and looked at the others.

"What if he gets mad and throws it?" he whispered loudly.

"We won't give him a chance," Corporal Haber whispered back. "Larse, I'll talk to him and keep his attention. You plug the little bastard before he can pull the pin." He smiled at the boy. "How much?"

Before the boy could answer, PFC Larsen had raised his M-60 and yelled, "Die, you Commie bastard!" But, instead of a noisy burst from his machine gun, all that was heard was an empty click. He looked down. They all looked. "I ain't got a belt in here!" He turned to the medic. "Reynolds, did you get my goddamn bullets?"

Spec Four Reynolds, weaving happily, closed his eyes and smiled. "I got all your magazines, too. None of you have bullets."

The men quickly looked at their M-16's. All the magazines, each containing twenty bullets, had vanished. Even the extra ones they carried in their shirt pockets were gone.

"How the hell . . . ?" Corporal Haber sputtered.
"You'll all be better men for what I've done," Reynolds informed them solemnly. "I'm saving you from yourselves." He turned and walked out of the clearing, back toward the battalion. The boy made no motion to throw the grenade. He waited until Spec Four Reynolds was gone, then slipped one finger through the pin-ring, preparing to pull the pin.

"You still want to buy grenade?" he asked innocently. PFC Kennedy gulped. "Oh, shit."

As all the men stood frozen, Corporal Haber suddenly began digging into his pockets.

"What're you doin', Habe?" PFC Larsen asked.

"We're gonna buy a grenade," Corporal Haber answered. "Unless you have a better suggestion."

As the men cursed and dug into their pockets, the boy watched them and smiled.

"I got lot more, too," he said.

"Oh, shut up," PFC Kennedy growled.

As night fell, the village had been completely surrounded. The villagers, surprised that the soldiers were staying, crept nervously into bunkers made of logs and dried mud. All the lights in the village were put out. The villagers waited, puzzled and anxious, huddled inside their bunkers, and peered out at the dark paddies where the soldiers, puzzled and anxious, crouched behind dikes and peered into the dark village.
Private First Class Kennedy tapped Lieutenant Colonel Burnside on the arm. "Sir . . . ?"

"Shhh. I'm looking."

PFC Kennedy squinted into the dark to try to make out what the colonel was seeing. All he could see under the starlight was the low roofline of the village hooches a hundred yards away.

"What do you see, sir?" he asked after a moment.

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside was irritated.

"I didn't say I saw something, soldier. I said I was looking. I didn't say I was seeing."

PFC Kennedy digested this a moment.

"What are you looking for?" he asked finally.

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside was becoming more and more irritated. He turned around, prepared to chew the man's ass for annoying him. But just as the curses formed on his lips, they were forced back down by a sudden realization. He didn't know what he was looking for. The realization startled him. General Rush hadn't really said what to look for. He rubbed his eyes. He hoped he hadn't hurt them straining in the dark that way.

"Why don't you go find out what we're looking for?" he finally asked PFC Kennedy. He had an idea they were looking for VC, but they would be a little hard to see, unless they were carrying lanterns or flashlights. Maybe they should be looking for lights, he thought. If the VC were going to sneak out of the village, they would need some way to see
where the hell they were going. It must be lights, he con-
cluded.

PFC Kennedy slogged through the mud angrily. Hell, he
didn't want to go wandering around in the dark all night.
Who was he supposed to ask? He stumbled suddenly upon the
chaplain reading Bible verses in the dark to Lieutenant
St. James.

"What are we looking for, Chaplain?" he asked.

"Shhh . . .," whispered Lieutenant St. James, annoyed
at the interruption in his salvation. "Go on, Chaplain."

"Blessed are the meek, for they . . . ."

"Chaplain . . . ." PFC Kennedy tried again.

"Shhh!"

"I got a question!" PFC Kennedy yelled.

Both the chaplain and the lieutenant looked up.

"What are we looking for?" PFC Kennedy asked, somewhat
embarrassed at having yelled.

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher looked fondly at the lieutenant
beside him. "We're looking for the light, aren't we, Lieutenant?"

Lieutenant St. James nodded humbly.

PFC Kennedy stood there a moment as the chaplain went on
with his Bible recitation, watching the lieutenant nodding
reverently in the dark. Then he walked back to find Lieutenant
Colonel Burnside.

"The chaplain said that?" Lieutenant Colonel Burnside
had suspected it might be lights they were looking for. Any-
time there were no lights anywhere in sight, any lights
naturally would be suspicious. Lieutenant Colonel Burnside wasn't a religious man, and he doubted that the chaplain was much of a military man -- still, it made sense. He looked toward the dark village. A signal light, perhaps, from one of the hooches. He turned to the soldier.

"All right, go tell the men to look out for lights."

PFC Kennedy walked away disgusted. Hell, he hadn't wanted to come ask the colonel what to look for in the first place, but Corporal Haber had made him do it. And now he damned sure didn't want to go stumbling around telling every man in the whole goddamn battalion to look for lights. He decided just to tell his squad and let everybody else figure it out for themselves. Hell, let them go ask the colonel like he had to.

At first, Corporal Haber didn't believe him.

"What kinda light?"

PFC Kennedy shrugged.

"Hell, I don't know. Any light."

"Shit," Corporal Haber said. They all peered into the dark, looking for a light.

"I think I see one," Private Bufford said suddenly.

"Where was it?" Corporal Haber demanded.

"Right over there."

"Where?"

"There."

"Hell, you think I can see where you're pointin' in the dark?" Corporal Haber asked, annoyed.
"I wasn't pointin'," Private Bufford replied, insulted.

"Was it in the village?" PFC Kennedy asked.

"Yeah . . . ," Private Bufford answered slowly, " . . . least it was over that way . . . over towards Rong Song . . . I guess it was in there . . . ."

"What kinda light was it?" Corporal Haber demanded.

"Hell, just a light. I don't know . . . just a light . . . ." 

"That's the kind we're lookin' for," PFC Kennedy said quickly. "Just any light."

The men in the squad looked again toward the village. Suddenly, the light flashed again, small and quickly gone, away in the distance. It seemed to come from the village.

"By God, it is a light," Corporal Haber declared, somewhat startled. "Get your M-60, Larse."

PFC Larsen lugged his machine gun up to a dike and propped out the two legs on the barrel for support.

"Where you want it, Habe?" he asked.

"Right over there where those lights were."

PFC Larsen aimed carefully into the dark. "OK, Habe, I think I just about got it here . . . ." He fingered the trigger.

"Let her rip, Larse," Corporal Haber commanded.

The burst of machine gun fire lit up the night with its spaced red tracer rounds. PFC Larsen adjusted his aim by watching the red streaks and held back the trigger hard. The bullets raked the village and whistled and popped on into the
woods on the other side, where Sergeant Walter Melville of "B" Company was trying to light a cigarette. He had found one of Colonel Majeskie's leaflets and, wondering what it was, had been trying to get his cigarette lighter lit in the damp air so he could read the leaflet. It had flared up a couple of times and gone out quickly, and Sergeant Melville was preparing to try again when the night exploded around his head. Bullets cracked and zipped and whizzed over his head and over the heads of the men in his platoon. They all scrambled for cover.

"What the shit, Sarge?" one of the men asked him.

Sergeant Melville peeked over a dike into the village.

"I don't know," he said. "Them bastards in that village must've seen my lighter."

"What're we waitin' for?" someone asked.

"Yeah, let's get them slopes," someone seconded the idea.

Sergeant Melville cautiously raised his head over the dike. A fresh burst of red-tailed bullets pop-pop-popped by his head. He sunk quickly down into the mud of the paddy. He motioned to his machine-gunner. "Jergens, get that M-60 over here."

The machine-gunner set up on the dike and cut loose a burst that tore through the flimsy village hooches and sailed over the heads of the soldiers on the other side of the circle, nearly finishing Lieutenant Colonel Burnside, who had been standing up trying to see what idiot had fired the first rounds. He dove into the muddy water of the paddy.
"Artillery!" he sputtered. "I want artillery!"

Meanwhile, Corporal Haber had summoned Private Larsen to fire again in retaliation. Private Larsen let loose a long blast that was answered by one from the other side of the encirclement. Soon, the whole circle was ablaze with rifle shots and red bursts from the M-60's.

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside scrambled to his radio operator and grabbed the handset. "Four-two, four-two, this is one-zero. Over."

Four-two, Lieutenant St. James, was thirty yards away, listening raptly to the chaplain's rendition of the Bible. He had taken the radio from the chaplain and had laid it down in the water, so that only a bubbly sputter arose from the handset.

"Goddamnit! Answer me!" Lieutenant Colonel Burnside yelled into the handset, as the rounds exploded like popcorn all around him. He stared at the handset and then threw it down. Knowing Lieutenant St. James was only a few yards away, he edged quickly down the dike to find the sonofabitch.

The fight raged on, all four sides of the circle crouching behind dikes, pouring rounds into the dark toward each other. The rounds ripped apart the thatched houses in the village and whistled low and deadly past the village, keeping everyone pinned down. Everyone except Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher.

Suddenly realizing that Lieutenant St. James was only half-listening to the scriptures, the chaplain looked around.
He heard a deafening clatter of bullets and stood up to see what all the commotion was about.

Lieutenant St. James, huddled behind the dike, saw the chaplain get up and quickly pulled him back down. The chaplain sank to his knees and leaned against the dike.

"You could get killed that way, Chaplain . . . ."

Lieutenant St. James, at first relieved, looked fearfully at the chaplain, whose eyes were like saucers in the dark. "Chaplain?" He leaned closer. "Chaplain?" The chaplain's mouth moved, as he tried to speak. A stream of dark blood bubbled out, and he fell backward into the paddy mud, gasping for air.

"Chaplain!"

Lieutenant St. James, confused and scared, started to help the chaplain up. He drew back in horror. A dark stain spread quickly around a dime-sized hole in the chaplain's fatigues, just above his left pocket. The blood bubbled out of the punctured lung in spurts, like a pumping oil well. The chaplain moaned and turned his head from side to side, expelling great gushes of blood each time his mouth opened.

Lieutenant St. James, terrified into paralysis, stared at the dying man. Visions of his radio men flashed like gunbursts; their accusing words whizzed like bullets inside his head. This was it, he thought frantically. This was the last chance for expiation -- he couldn't blow it. Knowing from hours of basic medical training that the chaplain's
lungs were collapsing, Lieutenant St. James did what he had to do — the only thing he could think to do — he stuck his finger in the hole. The chaplain groaned.

"T-t-turn your head to the side, Chaplain, so you won't choke on the b-b-b-blood." Lieutenant St. James, with tears of desperation clouding his vision, wiped his eyes with his free hand and reached for his radio. It was lying in the water and made no sound at all. The batteries were soggy and dead. "D-d-don't move," he told the chaplain, as they both groaned. Lieutenant St. James could see the chaplain's face growing deathly pale in the dark and could hear the liquid, choking moans, the awful rattling in the throat. He gasped as his mind conjured up specters that flanked the chaplain's groaning form like pall bearers. Lieutenant St. James cried out as he recognized the faces of his radio operators. Frantically, he looked around. "Medic!" he yelled. "Medic!"

Within a few minutes, a young medic came edging along in the mud, working his way down the dike. He kept one finger on his glasses to keep them from falling off his nose. Being rather fat, the medic huffed and panted in the dark and finally arrived. Collapsing against the dike, he looked at the chaplain. Suddenly, he stopped panting and looked at Lieutenant St. James.

"What are you doing with your finger?" he asked, horrified at the finger poked deep in the wound. He started to leave, backing away down the dike where he'd come from.
"You fix him," Lieutenant St. James said grimly, fighting off the tormenting visions of his radio men, knowing that the chaplain's death would bring them screaming and swarming into the deepest cells of his brain forever. "You fix him," he said wildly, grabbing his M-16 and pointing it at the medic, "or I'll fix you." Lieutenant St. James, in his helpless fury at fate, at death, at himself, was on the verge of tears, of breaking down completely. He could feel the soft lure of insanity, and he fought it. He pointed his M-16 at the medic and tried to blink away the specters from around the chaplain's body. He held his rifle on the sweating medic as he worked, fearfully and clumsily, at patching up the hole in the chaplain's chest. "Don't let him die," Lieutenant St. James prayed. "Please don't let him die."

The chaplain lay in the suburbs of consciousness, fading slowly from the bustle and worries of living toward the tranquillity and acceptance of dying. He groaned from the pain and prayed hazily to be spared, for there was so much work to do.

The medic, feverishly working at bandaging the wound, fully aware of the rifle held on him by the mad lieutenant, hoped that if anyone had to die, it would be the lieutenant.

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside, furious at receiving no answer from Lieutenant St. James, slogged at a crouch through the mud to find out what the hell was going on.
"Answer your radio, you sonofabitch," he said when he found the lieutenant. Bullets popped continuously above them.

"Nobody's calling me," Lieutenant St. James said, keeping his rifle trained on the medic's head.

"I was, goddamnit." Lieutenant Colonel Burnside looked around. "Where the hell's your radio?"

"Over there." Lieutenant St. James pointed. "In the water."

"In the water? Well, get it out of the water!"

"I can't. I have to hold this rifle. I can't."

"Here," Lieutenant Colonel Burnside said, taking the rifle and keeping it pointed at the medic's head. "Now, go get some goddamn dry batteries out of your pack and get that radio working. I need some artillery." He held the rifle while Lieutenant St. James felt around in the black water for the radio. Keeping one eye on the chaplain, Lieutenant St. James put dry batteries in the radio and got it working.

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside, during the finding and fixing of the radio, happened to glance at the medic, who had finished tying up the chaplain's wound and was shaking all over, his eyes clenched tight. Suspecting immediately that the man had malaria, Lieutenant Colonel Burnside sent him away. The medic, with a yelp, scrambled along the dike and disappeared quickly into the darkness.

"You shouldn't have chased him off!" Lieutenant St. James moaned suddenly, seeing the medic vanishing down the dike.
"He's got to save the chaplain." Lieutenant St. James dropped the radio and slopped over to the chaplain's side. He picked up one pale hand of the chaplain and felt sadly the dwindling heartbeat. "No!" he yelled. "He can't die!" he sobbed in panic.

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside was startled. He had thought the chaplain, who he knew to be a lazy sort, was sleeping. He looked closer and saw the wide bandage that showed on the chaplain's chest through his unbuttoned and bloody fatigue shirt. "I'll be damned," he exclaimed in amazement. Lieutenant Colonel Burnside had never seen a wounded chaplain before -- he hadn't even considered the possibility. He wondered if the chaplain's credibility would be worth a damn after getting himself shot like the most common infantry private. It certainly couldn't help his image much. He stared again at the pale chaplain. "I'll be damned."

"You've got to save him!" Lieutenant St. James was sobbing hysterically. "Get a Medivac! Please!" He looked at the chaplain, whose eyes were now closed. "Oh, God, please! Get a Medivac!"

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside, abruptly snapped out of his speculations on the chaplain's religious future, recovered himself and turned briskly to his forward observer. "There will be no Medivac choppers in here until I get some artillery," he declared, feeling his advantage in the situation.

Lieutenant St. James argued frantically that the chaplain was dying. Lieutenant Colonel Burnside had no intention,
however, of being intimidated by a junior officer. He stuck by his artillery. Finally, in one last desperate chance, Lieutenant St. James grabbed the radio and called the PDC. He could hardly speak for the sobs of guilt and grief that racked his throat and chased up nervous globs of phlegm from his tortured insides.

"Tell them you want artillery," Lieutenant Colonel Burnside urged impatiently, watching the lieutenant floundering around on the radio.

"I-I-I . . .," Lieutenant St. James tried again. "Ah-ah-ah-artillery!" He had no sooner gotten the word out than he heard from the chaplain a long, jarring gurgle that he took to be the death rattle. "Oh, no!" he moaned. "Oh, no!" He scrambled to the chaplain's side and patted him on the hand repeatedly. "Don't die," he sobbed, "don't die. Please don't die."

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside had just about decided to call the artillery himself when he heard Lieutenant Stillman's delighted voice coming over the radio. "Roger. Artillery. Watch for marking round. If you don't have any complaints then, we'll drop it on the deck. Scratch one village. Over."

Well, thank God there were sensible people at the battery, Lieutenant Colonel Burnside thought. He remembered suddenly that he had promised to get a medical helicopter down for the chaplain. "Is he dead?" he asked Lieutenant St. James, who shook his head dumbly. Lieutenant Colonel Burnside
frowned and picked up the radio handset. "Dust-off, Dust-off," he said into the handset, "this is one-zero. Over." He talked as loud as he could to overcome the racket from the firefight, which still raged back and forth across the circle.

"Roger, this is Dust-off," a voice crackled back, set into the background sound of the Medivac chopper's big blades puttering noisily.

"I have a wounded man. Over," Lieutenant Colonel Burnside yelled above the racket all around him.

"Sorry," the Medivac pilot said, "can't come in yet."

"Why the hell not?"

"There's people shootin' down there. Over," the Medivac pilot said. "You get 'em to stop, and we'll come in. Over."

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside was furious.

"You sonofabitch!" he yelled. "If we could keep 'em from shooting, we wouldn't need you! Out!"

The chopper, just a light in the high, dark sky, vanished within seconds without another word, taking with it the only hope for the chaplain.

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside stared after the chopper for a few moments. Then he turned to the chaplain who was gurgling weakly. Lieutenant St. James sat next to him in the mud, sobbing quietly and patting the wounded man absent-mindedly on the hand. "Please," he said to no one in particular. "Please save him . . . ."

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside watched the scene curiously. He didn't know exactly what to say. And he wasn't at all
certain about the relationship between the lieutenant and the chaplain. He hoped it wasn't perverted or anything like that. Suddenly, the chaplain murmured painfully, his voice barely escaping the blood bubbling around in his throat.

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside was waiting for the artillery, and the wounded man was making him uncomfortable. When he heard the chaplain murmuring, he frowned and felt obliged to say something to comfort the man. "Hang in there, Chaplain," he said. "Uh . . . why don't you bless yourself or something, Chaplain?" The chaplain didn't even try to bless himself, so Lieutenant Colonel Burnside assumed he didn't want advice and listened carefully for the sound of the artillery marking round to whistle down through the firefight and light up the countryside.

And, almost as suddenly as he had turned away from the dying chaplain, Lieutenant Colonel Burnside heard the whistle that would turn the tide of the battle. The shell screamed overhead and popped a hundred yards above the village. Great showers of white burning phosphorous streamed over the land. Several of the hooches in the village immediately caught fire.

The coming of the artillery gave a good feeling to the infantry on the ground. The shooting tapered off until finally there was none. Some of the men thought it strange that the VC would stop shooting the same time they did, but they shrugged it off and sat back to watch the artillery pound
the life out of everything even remotely communistic in the village of Rong Song.

And while the bright and burning white marking round was a cue to security for the infantry, it was a sign from above to the wounded chaplain, who gurgled and smiled weakly when he saw the heavens exploding.

Within minutes, after no complaints from the infantry as to location of the round, the first high explosive rounds came arching up out of the distant battery and went whistling down into the village. A hooch exploded into a shower of straw.

Peering confidently over a dike, Lieutenant Colonel Burnside smiled and watched the orange explosions shake the village. By morning, there wouldn't be a Communist man, woman, or child left alive, he decided. Thank God for the artillery.

The infantry, who had completely stopped their shooting by now, listened intently as the rounds lifted obscurely out of the distance and whistled overhead to light up the village. They all smiled and yawned and knew they could leave the night to the artillery. It was a good feeling.

PFC Kennedy whistled with each round and shook his head in admiration, chuckling with each explosion. "Jesus, ain't that pretty?"

Corporal Haber grinned.

"You goddamned right, boy. There's gonna be some dead VC bastards in that place tonight."
Everyone sat watching and whistling and chuckling. Except for Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher, who lay gasping and gurgling in the mud and Lieutenant St. James, who sat patting him on the head, all the men were happy. The battle was half-won, already.

The village smoked and burned and blew in the night like a carnival. And, like boys happily watching the town's first carnival setting up, the infantry sat and whispered in a circle, hunched low in the dark, as the village crackled brightly in the night.

Shortly after midnight, a medical evacuation helicopter set down to pick up Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher, after demanding a momentary cease-fire in the artillery. As the chaplain was lugged onto the chopper, with Lieutenant St. James tagging sadly behind, two girls jumped off. They were Donut Dollies, American Red Cross volunteers in loudly-striped dresses who flew from camp to camp ladling out cheerful Kool-Aid and tasty doughnuts to the tired and homesick American soldiers.

They leaped off the chopper and quickly stuck to their ankles in the wet mud. But they kept smiling bravely, not wanting to upset the men, who looked around in the dark and wondered at the dim figures slopping through the mud.

"What is it, Habe?" PFC Kennedy asked, squinting at the striped apparitions.
Corporal Haber squinted, too, and shook his head. "Damned if I know," he said at last. "Looks like zebras to me."

"They're smilin', I think," PFC Kennedy said uncertainly. "Zebras don't smile, do they, Habe?" PFC Larsen asked. The men watched curiously as the figures came closer.

"Why, hell," PFC Larsen said suddenly, "it's them donut women! What're they doin' way out here, Habe?" Because Corporal Haber was a squad leader, PFC Larsen assumed his knowledge must be encyclopedic.

"I don't know what the hell they're up to," Corporal Haber observed, "but they're liable to get their pretty little butts shot off, runnin' around out here lookin' like zebras." He grinned.

The girls reached the dike where Corporal Haber's squad was strung out. All the men gathered closer. The girls were immaculately clean, except for their feet, which were invisible in the mud. One was tall and brown-haired; she smiled seductively. The other was short and plump and blonde; she smiled goofily, lifting her lip back from her buck teeth like drawing up the curtain on a matched pair of tombstones.

"Hi," the short girl said. "I'm Doris."

The men looked at the tall girl.

"Hi," she murmured, "I'm Roxie."

The men looked at each other and smiled.

PFC Larsen cheerfully broke the silence. "Well, hi," he said. "Ya'll got some donuts?"
"Sure do," replied the short girl eagerly. She opened the sack and passed it around. The men dipped into the bag greedily, glad for a change from C-rations.

Corporal Haber put a donut in his shirt pocket. "I believe I'll save this one for later."

"But, Habe . . . ," PFC Larsen could barely talk with his mouth full of donuts, " . . . it's gonna get too dirty to eat in your pocket."

Corporal Haber winked at the tall girl. "Oh, I don't want to eat it," he protested. "I only want it for the hole . . . and it ain't gonna get dirtier than some I've seen." He grinned.

The men snickered appreciatively. The tall girl smiled knowingly. The short girl blushed and tried to change the subject. She looked toward the burning village and drew in her breath sharply and dramatically. "Oh, Roxie!" she said to the tall girl. "Look! Isn't that beautiful?"

The tall girl looked for a moment at the glowing village. Then she turned to Corporal Haber. "Are there any Viet Cong in there, Corporal?"

PFC Larsen snickered. "Ain't no live ones."

"No," Corporal Haber said, grinning at the tall girl, "I imagine they're all done to a turn by now, ladies."

They all looked at the great bonfire a few moments. The short girl shuddered. "Oh, that's so gruesome. Let's talk about something else." She clapped her hands and smiled at the men. "Who wants to play a game?"
The men looked at each other and grinned.
"What kinda game?" PFC Kennedy asked.

The short girl was enthusiastic; she didn't often find anyone who wanted to play the games. "Oh, we have cards . . . and checkers . . . and . . . ."

"Cards'll be fine," Corporal Haber broke in. He was staring wantonly at the tall girl, who smiled back at him. "Poker," he said definitely.

"But, Corporal," the tall girl protested softly, "whatever will we use for stakes? We're not allowed to play for money . . . the Red Cross says that's a no-no."

"Spread out your poncho, Larse," Corporal Haber commanded. "We need a . . . a table." He grinned at the tall girl. Then he turned to the short girl, who was quite upset at having her game taken over by a loud-mouthed, dirty soldier. "Honey," he said to her, "why don't you take the rest of these donuts and go pass 'em around." He pointed past her, into the dark. "You've got a whole battalion to make happy. Your partner here'll keep us entertained."

The short girl tried to object, but Corporal Haber hushed her. "Go on, now," he urged her. "You've got a job to do."

The short girl cast a doubtful glance at Corporal Haber, but she took the bag and trudged off through the mud.

Corporal Haber grinned at the tall girl. She grinned back and winked. Turning to the other men, Corporal Haber put out his hand. "OK, gents, dig deep. Roxie here ain't a cheap broad."
"How much do you fellows have?" the tall girl asked innocently. "Poker can be an expensive game, you know."

Corporal Haber collected the money from the men in his squad. Luckily, the Vietnamese boy in the woods had run off after selling them the one grenade, and they had managed to escape with most of their money. Corporal Haber always insisted his squad carry money, even in the field, for emergencies like the boy, or like Roxie.

He handed the tall girl the money. All the men held their breaths while she counted it. Finally, she looked up and smiled and sat down on the spread-out vinyl poncho. "My goodness," she said, "Doris seems to have forgotten to leave the cards . . . ."

Corporal Haber grinned as he unbuttoned his pants.

"I reckon we'll have to fake it, huh?"

While Corporal Haber sat down with the girl, all the other men crept back to their places along the dike to await their turns. Some of them watched the village burning like a campfire and thought of the tall girl spread out on the poncho.

Private Tommy Bing crouched behind the dike. He was terrified. He had managed to slip away from his squad when the plump little blonde Donut Dolly had arrived. They had all been too busy trying to look up her dress while she handed out donuts and puzzles to notice him sneaking away.
At first, he had felt safe, finding a section of the
dike deserted by the men who had all clumped together to try
to seduce the Donut Dolly. Only a few more hours 'til dawn,
he had thought, only a few hours to go.

Then the machine guns had opened up. Soon, the whole
circle was ablaze with flashes and bursts and cracks and pops,
and Private Bing was utterly terrified.

He prayed. He prayed so hard that he found himself
yelling. He shut up quickly for fear of being found and
brought back to the squad. Shivering and sobbing, Private
Bing lay in the mud. Only fifteen days . . . why? why?

The rounds popped and cracked and whizzed red-tailed
by him, cutting muddy chunks out of the dike that shielded
him. Oh Lord, he prayed silently, oh Lord, just a few more
hours.

And suddenly, in the midst of the battle, there was
silence. A great white explosion ripped the air, and the
artillery began to pound into the village. Was it over?
he wondered. He listened. But, just as Private Bing was
preparing to look up, he heard a sloshing down the dike
from him. He listened harder. Footsteps! And they were
getting closer!

His first frantic thought was that the battalion had
been overrun by the Viet Cong. But how . . . ? He listened,
not daring to look up. The footsteps sloshed closer, coming
through the paddy mud toward him.
Unable to control the urge, Private Bing looked up. His heart yo-yoed up and down in his throat, as he made out a dark, dim figure approaching him -- carrying a rifle! They had been overrun! His heart pounded like a jackhammer, threatening to beat through his ribs. Overrun! What could he do? Flashes of Loretta in her blue-sequined dress played quickly before his eyes. He could see the country queen waving good-bye to him. Private Bing groaned.

Suddenly, he heard the puttering of a helicopter. He looked up and saw the Medivac chopper coming down close by. If only he could reach it! But would they take him? He doubted they would take an unwounded man. What to do? The footsteps became louder. Quickly, Private Bing picked up his M-16. He put it on automatic and pointed it at his foot. With one burst, he thought desperately, he could scare off the approaching Viet Cong . . . and he could get out of the field. Who would know whether or not he'd been hit by an enemy bullet?

The footsteps were almost upon him when he closed his eyes and thought of Loretta and pulled the trigger.

PFC Caldwell hit the mud with a splat. His heart pounded. Jesus! He had thought the figure curled up by the dike was Bing, but it must be a VC, he decided. PFC Caldwell lay flat, fearing he was a goner. Trapped on the same side of the dike as the VC, only yards away, he didn't stand a chance. The
sonofabitch must have a machine gun, he thought. At least fifteen rounds had poured out. PFC Caldwell couldn't understand how the man had missed him with all fifteen rounds, but he didn't want to give him another chance. He aimed his M-16 at the dark figure and put his finger on the trigger. This, he knew would be his only chance -- he couldn't afford to miss.

Then he heard a moan. He got up slowly and crept over to the figure. By this time, most of the other men from the squad were there. They huddled around the moaning man. PFC Rogers leaned down and looked closely.

"Hey! It's Bing!" he said, startled. The others looked closer.

"Jesus!" PFC Caldwell said sickly. "He done blewed his foot off!"

"Damn near," said PFC Rogers. The foot was an undefined dark stump protruding from the shredded, bloody jungle boot.

Private Bing groaned. "Oh . . . my foot . . . oh . . . oh, my foot . . . ."

"Get a medic over here!" PFC Rogers yelled.

"Here's one!" someone said after a moment. Everyone turned to see.

Spec Four Reynolds held up two fingers. "Peace," he said, smiling and weaving in the dark.

"Peace, hell!" PFC Rogers yelled at him. "Give this man some morphine. Caldwell, get the Medivac over here."
He looked again at Private Bing's mangled foot. It made him sick and angry. He shook his head. "Jesus, Bing, why didn't you just use one round?"

"I - I - I didn't know . . . I - I . . . oh, Jesus, my foot . . . ," Private Bing sobbed. "Oh, God . . . my foot . . . ."

PFC Rogers turned angrily to the medic.

"Goddamnit, Reynolds, where's that morphine?"

Spec Four Reynolds swayed gently and smiled. He spoke slowly and deliberately, the words barely dragging themselves over his lip. "Don't have any . . . lost it all . . . ."

PFC Caldwell, who had just gotten back from calling the Medivac, grabbed the medic and shook him. "Why, you . . . !" He turned to the other men. "This bastard's high as a kite! He's been usin' that damn stuff to get high again!"

"Atrocious," said the medic, shaking his head slowly and trying to cluck his tongue.

PFC Rogers shoved the medic away disgustedly. "Get him outta here," he said, "before I kill the sonofabitch. Somebody give me a belt -- I'll make a tourniquet. Bing's bleedin' to death." He knelt down and wiped the mud from Private Bing's face and shook his head sadly. "Bing, you poor, dumb bastard . . . ."

Spec Four Reynolds, sitting in the water where he had fallen, nodded solemnly. "Poor, dumb bastard . . . .," he said slowly.
Within a few minutes, the Medivac chopper had landed to pick up Private Bing. The men in the squad laid out a poncho and lifted him onto it, then carried him, three men on each side of the poncho, and laid him in the helicopter. Just as the men moved back to escape the wind from the chopper blades, the pilot jumped out. Simultaneously, the door gunner got out and walked to the front of the chopper. They talked and laughed a moment, then the gunner climbed into the pilot's seat. He shifted around in the seat, grinning like a little boy and raised his crossed fingers to the pilot, who walked to the back of the chopper and got in behind the machine gun in the door where the gunner had been. He pointed the machine in all different directions and grinned proudly.

The helicopter lurched suddenly off the ground. It rose about ten feet, then bumped back to the ground. Finally, as the men on the ground watched unbelieving, it lifted off and began to climb crookedly upward.

As the chopper soared out of sight, swinging from side to side, the men could see nothing but a red stream of bullets spraying from it down into the dark trees behind them. Then it was gone.

The men stared upward long after it had disappeared.

No one spoke.
After a minute or two, they all silently turned away to go back to their positions. PFC Rogers shook his head and muttered, "We should have kept the poor bastard here -- where he'd be safe."

The other men nodded in the dark.

Daylight was breaking when Lieutenant Colonel Burnside awoke with a start. He was cramped and cold from dozing all night in the muddy water. He looked around. The men were yawning and stretching. Some had opened cans of C-rations for breakfast. He hoped the bastards hadn't slept all night. They weren't paid to sleep on operations. He, himself, had had a very hard time getting to sleep. He was used to the dry country farther north, and the wretched wet air and mud of the paddies made his neck stiff. He rubbed his neck and looked toward Rong Song.

The village lay smoking and levelled after the night's bombardment. Time to move in, he thought tiredly, scratching his unshaven face. As he rubbed his hand over the stubble on his chin, he could feel the mud caked in patches here and there. Thinking of his dirty face, Lieutenant Colonel Burnside remembered the many times he had led other battalions into other battles. And after all the mud and the pain and grief, after the artillery and the stiff neck and all the other things precluding sleep, after all these hardships, perhaps the job was worth it, he thought. When the long,
hard night had ended, he knew, it was left up to him to rally
the men for a sweep through the battle area. He was the
leader.

He yawned. Yes, by God, chopper-jockeys like Colonel
Majeskie could putter around like jackasses all the damned
night in helicopters, but when the dawn brought the final
reckoning, it was the man on the ground who counted. He felt
the pride well up in him. He stood up and breathed deeply.
He stepped up onto a dike, so the men could see him in the
early morning light, unafraid of the new day, unbeaten by
the long night.

The warm sunlight made him yawn again.

"Sir," a voice came from the paddy behind him, "when
do we move out?"

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside turned around on the dike,
almost losing his balance. Captain Adams stood in the paddy
looking up at him. "My company is ready, sir, any time you
are."

"Let the men eat something," Lieutenant Colonel Burnside
said. He looked at the flattened village. "Those VC aren't
going anywhere. We'll move out in fifteen minutes. Spread
the word. You take your company into the village. I'll go
with you. The rest can keep watch while we sweep." He
felt very much like the superb field commander he knew he
was.

The captain nodded and left.
Lieutenant Colonel Burnside sat down and called his RTO. "Harris, bring me some C-rations."

Spec Five Harris, a tall, bi-focalled draftee, brought over several cans and showed them nervously to his commander, of whom he was scared to death. Lieutenant Colonel Burnside looked at the cans and named them. "Ham and lima beans. Cookies and jam. Apricots." He looked distastefully at the cans.

"Are they all right, sir?" Harris asked.

Of course, it wasn't all right, but Lieutenant Colonel Burnside knew that a leader should eat no better than his men. Besides, he hadn't told the cook to pack any roast beef sandwiches. He liked to take the sandwiches on operations, although he realized it would be impractical for all men to do so, and he had to justify it to himself every time he took them. But justifying taking the sandwiches was a lot easier than eating the greasy canned food the men ate, and Lieutenant Colonel Burnside frowned as he looked at the can of ham and lima beans and imagined the white chunks of grease floating on top of the food.

"Is it all right, sir?" Harris asked again.

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside looked up at his radio operator incredulously. All right? He was just about to tell the man that it was far from all right when he remembered that commanders should eat the same crap as their men. These men were new to him, and he didn't know but one of them might
report him for eating better than his men. He scowled as pleasantly as he could.

"Of course it's all right," he said.

The RTO sighed with relief and left to eat his own C-rations.

As Lieutenant Colonel Burnside opened the cans, he noticed someone watching him. At first, he thought it must be one of the men checking to see if he was really eating the C-rations. He kept his head down, aware of the eyes on him, and opened the can of ham and limas. Sure enough, the first thing he saw was the grease, broken apart like an ice floe, cluttering up the surface of the bean juice. He thought suddenly of roast beef sandwiches and knew he could never eat the grease. He thought, too, of the enlisted spy watching him, ready to report to the Pentagon a commander who wouldn't eat what his men ate. He looked again at the white greasy layer in the can. The hell with the spy, he decided and looked up defiantly.

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside was very surprised to see the reporter standing a few feet away. His first impulse was to curse and beat the man for not leaving the day before. But he was so relieved at not having to eat the C-rations that his leniency went out to the man. Feeling very much like the excellent field commander he knew he was, Lieutenant Colonel Burnside saw that the reporter was exhausted. Covered with mud, eyes red from lack of sleep, knees shaking and
threatening to buckle, Barton stood in a stupor and fought the natural urge to pass out.

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside pitied the poor fellow. After all, he figured, the dumb sonofabitch had a job to do, too. "Sit down," he commanded, cordially.

Barton flopped down, missing the dike completely and falling to sprawl exhausted in the paddy mud.

"Want something to eat?" Lieutenant Colonel Burnside asked, holding out the can of ham and limas.

Barton shook his head, staring blankly at nothing.

"None of them . . . ," he mumbled. "None . . . none of them . . . ."

"None what?"

"Not one . . . ," Barton muttered sadly. "Not one . . . ."

"Not one what?" Lieutenant Colonel Burnside asked. The man made no more sense than a private, and it irritated him.

"Not one what, goddamnit?"

"They all hate it . . . all of them . . . ."

"Hate what?" Lieutenant Colonel Burnside wanted to shake the reporter.

"The war," Barton said. "They all hate the war . . . ."

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside, feeling this morning every inch the embattled leader, was shocked at the blasphemy.

"Who hates the war?"

"They all do . . . ," Barton swept his hand in an arc that encompassed the whole infantry circle. "All of them . . . ."
"The . . . the men?"

Barton nodded sadly. "I looked all night . . . I asked everybody . . . nobody liked it . . . ." Barton wanted to go home. Sick and upset, the only patriot in Viet Nam, he felt alone and unwanted. He would go back to Cleveland and ask to be made society editor.

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside was insulted. After he had led all these oafs through a night like the one just over, they had the ungrateful audacity to hate the war? He could scarcely believe it. The only explanation he could think of was that they were all battle-weary, shell-shocked. He regained his composure. Yes, that must be it. The night had been long and hard.

"Don't you worry, son," he told the reporter confidently. "Once we sweep through that village, and those men get a look at all the dead VC . . . they'll snap out of it."

Barton blinked to fight back frustrated tears. "You really think so?" he asked.

"I'm positive of it," Lieutenant Colonel Burnside said firmly. "In a war like this, it's easy to get discouraged, because a man can't always see the tangible results of his fighting and his courage and his suffering. But when we hit that village" -- he clapped his hands loudly -- "you just watch that morale soar!"

Barton leaned forward eagerly.
"Sir?" he said in a hopeful voice. "Sir, do . . . do you . . . do you like the war?"

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside, feeling his command snug and secure and luxurious about him like a fine Hong Kong suit, grinned majestically. "Well, it's not the best . . . but it's all we've got, son. It's not a bad little war."

Barton grinned and pulled out a notepad. "That's great! Can I write that down, sir? Can I tell my paper in Cleveland?"

He suddenly felt like a cub reporter covering his first story, instead of the grizzled veteran of an intolerable night of firefights and frustrations. "Can I have a picture, too?"

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside blushed a little. "Oh, well, I have one on my desk back at camp. Maybe you could stop by . . . ."

"Oh, I have my own camera," Barton said, fumbling for it. "I know!" he said, snapping his fingers. "I'll take a picture as the man move into the village! I'll take your picture commanding them!"

"Good idea. Yes, not a bad idea," Lieutenant Colonel Burnside agreed. "Would you like some breakfast?"

"Oh, no, thank you, sir," Barton said quickly, fumbling again in his pack. "I have some sandwiches."

"Oh?" Lieutenant Colonel Burnside leaned forward. "Say, how would you like it if I let you eat some real C-rations . . . just like the soldiers do?"

Barton almost fainted. "Me, sir? Oh yes! Yessir!"
"Here you are." Lieutenant Colonel Burnside handed him the can of ham and limas. "Now, uh . . . what kind of sandwiches . . . ?"

"Oh . . . ," Barton was embarrassed. " . . . they're just roast beef sandwiches. You're welcome to them, of course, sir, but they're . . . I mean . . . they're not much . . . ." He dug them out and handed them to Lieutenant Colonel Burnside, who laughed amiably and took the sandwiches.

"Well, of course, they aren't ham and limas," he chuckled.

"No, sir . . . ," Barton mumbled, his mouth full of the greasy green beans and meat, feeling incredibly patriotic.

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside bit into one of the sandwiches. The ketchup spurted onto his fingers. He licked it off. He watched Barton eagerly wolfing down the cold, greasy beans. No, he thought as he took another juicy bite of the sandwich, they certainly weren't ham and limas.

Barton looked up and grinned, the white grease clinging to the corners of his mouth.

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside grinned back, a string of roast beef playing joyously between his teeth.

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside walked along beside Captain Adams of "A" company. The infantry men moved more or less on line into the smoking village. The commander's optimism was fading as he watched the men slop along toward the village. He wondered what the newsman was going to write.
Barton trailed a few steps behind, talking quietly into his tape recorder: "It is fascinating to be on an operation like this, when all the men are alert to the slightest movement from the enemy village . . . ." He watched the scraggly columns of smoke curling up from the village and felt his heart pounding with the excitement of war, with the intense spirit of the hunt.

All around him, the soldiers laughed and talked as they slogged through the paddies. "Hey, newsboy!" one of them yelled. "Take my pitcher!"

Barton kept his eyes trained on the village lying quiet after the bombardment. He watched, hypnotized and frightened, like one watches a wounded lion in the jungle, ready always for the sudden rejuvenation and the deadly, desperate last spring at the killer. He watched and kept talking, quietly and nervously: "The men laugh and make jokes as a release from the tensions of the long, dangerous night before. But they are alert, their rifles poised . . . soon will come their moment of truth . . . ."

A black soldier thumped Barton on the shoulder. "Hey, you got any cigrets? I'm out."

Barton sensed the black soldier's boldness, and it frightened him a little. He shook his head. The black man sauntered off, his rifle on his shoulder, like a squirrel hunter. Barton made a mental note to write an article on the Black Soldier in Viet Nam, but he soon forgot it and again gazed intently toward Rong Song.
"You're not talking all that biased crap, are you?"
Barton was startled. Lieutenant Colonel Burnside had dropped back and was walking beside him.
"W-w-w-what crap, sir?" he asked nervously.
"Don't give me that crap. You know what crap I mean. All that biased crap about the men not givin' a shit. That crap."
Barton was shocked. "Oh, no, sir," he said quickly, running his recorder back and letting it play through.
Lieutenant Colonel Burnside listened, then frowned. "Crap," he said disgustedly.
"Sir?" Barton was getting confused.
Lieutenant Colonel Burnside swept his arm toward the haphazard line of soldiers. "Do those bastards look alert to you?"
Barton looked. The men looked sleepy and nonchalant. "Well . . . ."
"Well, hell!" yelled Lieutenant Colonel Burnside. "Crap! That's what it is!" He pointed to the tape recorder and glared at Barton. "You'd better get your shit together," he said and stalked away, wishing to hell Colonel Majeskie would crash. He saw one of the colonel's leaflets on the muddy ground: BEE BEE BUMBLEBEE! ALL OUT CAN COME IN FREE! Jesus, he thought, kicking the leaflet. What an asshole! He heard Colonel Majeskie's chopper buzzing overhead like a shitfly. The war was turning sour again.
Barton talked even quieter into his recorder: "We can hear the infantry brigade commander's helicopter circling high overhead . . . like a watchful hawk over the nest of victims below . . . like a great eagle watching its young circle their angry prey . . . ." He whispered into the recorder, keeping one eye on the village and the other on Lieutenant Colonel Burnside. "It must be inspiring for the men to know that their leader watches over them, day and night . . . ."

Colonel Majeskie yawned. It had been a long night. The chopper blades had made so much noise, he had thought he would never get to sleep. He yawned again and looked at the copy of Ebony the supply clerk had stuck into the canvas, waterproof pouch where maps were supposed to go.

Colonel Majeskie thumbed through the magazine, looking briefly at the pictures. He didn't really think he was prejudiced, but he just couldn't see how anybody could think black girls were as pretty as white ones. He closed the magazine. Or that anyone could compare white girls with the Vietnamese girls in the laundry. Colonel Majeskie smiled to himself. He thought of the laundry girls with their gleaming tits jostling over the wash tubs. But the picture brought back the thought of the unseen sniper training his rifle at the vulnerable head through the back window. Sweat broke out on Colonel Majeskie's neck. He thumped the pilot
Lieutenant Colonel Burnside watched Colonel Majeskie's chopper soar out of sight. He shook his head and wished Colonel Majeskie would fly too high and suffocate from lack of air.

"Sir, the lead elements are in the village."

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside looked around. Captain Adams was pointing toward Rong Song, which was only about fifty yards away. Shading his eyes, Lieutenant Colonel Burnside could see soldiers poking around in the ashes that had yesterday been a village. He nodded to Captain Adams, who went on ahead. Then he dropped back to wait for the reporter.

"Ever seen dead people?" he asked Barton, who had quickly shut off his tape recorder when he saw Lieutenant Colonel Burnside coming.

Barton thought a moment. "Dead people? Oh, sure!"

He remembered vividly having seen his grandmother laid out years ago in her rose taffeta dress in the pale-blue casket. The image had haunted him all these years. Even now, his eyes went misty when he thought of the dear dead lady.

"Sure," he said, blinking back tears. "I . . . I've seen . . . ." He stopped, unable to go on.

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside eyed Barton strangely. These damned newsmen were a weird bunch, he concluded. "You've seen dead people, huh?"
Barton nodded and wiped his eyes.

"Good," Lieutenant Colonel Burnside said, walking on ahead. He hoped Colonel Majeskie would come down and pick up the reporter before his chopper crashed in a flaming ball. He looked up into the sky and was blinded by a great fire-ball. Shielding his eyes from the great light, Lieutenant Colonel Burnside almost choked on his heart. Could it be? He squinted and looked again and realized he had only been looking at the sun. "Crap," he muttered and walked on disgustedly toward the burned-out village, bright dots dancing in front of his eyes.

Rong Song was literally black. It had burned all night, and the grass and bamboo hooches had burned into drifting, fiery ashes that had all settled to the ground by morning, like dirty snow. Only faint little clouds of smoke lay over the black patches where frail houses had stood. Bits of crude furniture and cooking pans lay about, smouldering. Out of the black flatness jutted occasional hard-packed earthen bunkers, some blown into total ruin, others standing like little volcanoes, their tops blown away, smoke tumbling out.

"Here's one!" yelled a soldier.

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside walked over to a cluster of soldiers. They parted to let him in. A blackened torso lay smoking in the ashes. One leg had been torn away by the artillery. The arms were curled up until they hugged the
body. It was impossible to tell if it was male or female. Lieutenant Colonel Burnside frowned. The body wasn't a pretty sight, even for an old infantryman like himself. He turned around and yelled for Barton to come over.

"You say you've seen dead people," he said when Barton had arrived. He pointed at the body. "Well, here's one very dead gook."

Barton leaned over to look. All he could see was ashes ... and an unidentifiable black mass that looked like a bedroll. Puzzled, he looked up at the infantrymen. They grinned. Horrified by their expressions, Barton looked back at the body, realizing what it was. Then he ran a few yards away and vomited. As he retched, he heard the men laughing.

"Hey!" one of them laughed, "you're insultin' the dead!"

Barton looked around, pale and sick. He saw one of the men laughing and pointing at the ground where he was vomiting. He looked down. Another crisp body lay armless at his feet, spattered with chewed-up ham and lima beans.

Barton ran.

He ran until he tripped. The laughter was roaring in his ears as he hit the ground. The men were pointing again. He looked quickly beside him. All he could do was stare hypnotically, as two burned-out eyesockets stared back at him. He realized he had tripped over another body. The laughter rose like a choir in his head. The sky whirled as he lay on his back. Barton could smell the burnt flesh before he fainted.
PFC Vernon Caldwell leaned over the unconscious reporter and grinned. "Looka there, Ferg," he called to his buddy. "Hey, why doncha take some pitchers for the pore old boy?"

PFC Ferguson grinned. He reached down and took the camera from around Barton's neck. He snapped a picture of the prostrate reporter. All the men grouped around, wanting their pictures taken.

"Hey, man, take this!" PFC Kennedy yelled. He had his arm around a limp and bloody body in whose gray lips he had dangling a cigarette.

Ferguson grinned and snapped the picture.

"Here! Here, Ferg!" PFC Caldwell had out his knife and was cutting off the ring finger of a young Vietnamese girl, whose chest lay open and raw and whose head had been nearly severed.

Ferguson grinned again and snapped the picture.

Irritated at being upstaged, PFC Kennedy ran over to a destroyed bunker and dragged out two bodies, a woman and a man. He lay the man between the woman's shattered legs and pulled her torn pants down to her knees. The men roared with delight as PFC Ferguson took the picture.

"Ain't it just like them animals?" PFC Kennedy giggled, proud of regaining attention. "Ain't it just like them gooks to be screwin' while there's artillery fallin' on 'em?"

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside watched the men having their fun but soon got bored at their childish antics. He looked
around the village for a few minutes, then he called Captain Adams over.

"Adams, have the men look around for weapons."

"Yessir." Captain Adams sent a number of his men into the ashes and blown-out bunkers to search for weapons. After a short while, he came back to Lieutenant Colonel Burnside, who sat next to the unconscious Barton, playing Barton's tape and swearing.

"Sir," Captain Adams said, "we didn't find any weapons. But we found this." He gestured behind him. Two of the men were dragging a whimpering old man. They brought him to where Lieutenant Colonel Burnside sat cross-legged cursing at the tape. The old man was dirty and scared. He cried and moaned something over and over in Vietnamese.

"What's he saying?" Lieutenant Colonel Burnside asked. Captain Adams, who spoke the language, listened carefully to the old man. "He says his whole family was killed." He listened again. "He says they were murdered last night."

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside frowned. "Well, tell him we're not detectives, Adams. And ask him where all the weapons are."

Captain Adams spoke to the old man in Vietnamese. The old man mumbled something, then cried more than ever. "He says there are no weapons here," Captain Adams said. "He says there aren't even any VC here -- there never were."

"Crap!" Lieutenant Colonel Burnside got up. He grabbed
the old man and shook him. "What do you mean there aren't any VC here?" he demanded. "This is a VC village, goddamnit!"

Captain Adams translated. The old man cried and fell to the ground, sobbing.

"Now, what the hell is this?" Lieutenant Colonel Burnside raged. "A whole village full of pacifist Viet Cong? What the hell does he think he's trying to pull?"

Captain Adams spoke again to the old man, who shook his head and cried noisily. "He still says there are no weapons," Captain Adams said at last.

"Let me and Ferg talk to him, Colonel," PFC Caldwell grinned. "Me and Ferg'll loosen his tongue. Right, Ferg?"

PFC Ferguson grinned.

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside ignored the offer. This was the only POW they had. "We'll take him back to Division for questioning," he said to Captain Adams, who signalled for the old man to be tied up. The old man cried pitifully.

"Gag him, too," Lieutenant Colonel Burnside ordered. Jesus! He hated the Vietnamese for being so sickeningly emotional. Their constant whimpering drove him almost crazy. They simply had no backbone at all.

While the old man was being tied up, Lieutenant Colonel Burnside heard Colonel Majeskie on the radio.

"How's it going down there? Over."

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside picked up his handset.

"Peachy. Over."
"Have you got a body count? Over."

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside turned to Captain Adams. "Go get a body count," he said, disgustedly. Then he spoke again into the handset. "Wait one on the body count. Over."

"There's something else," Colonel Majeskie said over the radio. "I want a platoon to go through a woodline over here. Pick one out and march them over this way. Over."

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside looked up at the chopper circling almost out of sight in the clear sky. What the hell now? he wondered. "What for? Over."

"We had action over here yesterday," Colonel Majeskie said, trying to sound authoritative like General Rush. "Now get those men over here. Over."

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside simmered on the ground, under the white-hot morning sun. "Oh, good God. Out," he said.

Colonel Majeskie didn't like being hung up on, but he let the incident pass. He gazed back over the woodline where the Huey chopper lay in tiny, shining pieces in the paddy. The thought had come to him this morning that someone would probably order an investigation of the missing helicopters. So it would be wise for him to have already at least conducted a search of the woodline, so he could say he tried to find the VC. Besides, he reasoned to himself, if any VC were found, the credit would rightfully be his, as commander-in-chief of the operation. He had never really gotten a combat
medal, except Private Bing's, and he couldn't take a great
deal of pride in that one, although he had taken an awful
chance by keeping it rather than sending it on to the infantry
company. If VC were taken prisoner, he knew, it would most
certainly mean a silver star, besides the one he planned to
recommend himself for, anyway, for the decimation of the
enemy village. He heard the radio crackle.

"Ready with body count. Over."

"Good, good," Colonel Majeskie said gleefully, taking
out his pencil and pad. "How many?"

"Twenty-three," Lieutenant Colonel Burnside said.

"Twenty-three?" Colonel Majeskie couldn't believe it.
Only twenty-three? After shooting artillery into the village
all night, could it be possible that only twenty-three Viet
Cong had been killed? Incredible!

"Did you count the women, too?" he asked anxiously.

"Roger. That's women, too."

"And children? Did you count children?"

"Roger. Twenty-three. That's everybody," Lieutenant
Colonel Burnside said from the ground. "I've sent the platoon
over. Good-bye."

Colonel Majeskie was so stunned that he didn't even
notice he'd been hung up on again. Twenty-three? It was
preposterous! He could never report that to General Rush.
A whole village surrounded and shelled, and only twenty-three
VC dead? He looked quickly to see if the pilot was watching
him. Seeing that he wasn't, Colonel Majeskie carefully wrote on his pad: BODY COUNT. And under that, he wrote: 123. He quickly put away the pad and pencil and ordered the pilot to fly over the woodline where the remains of the helicopter lay.

Twenty-three! Who did that Burnside think he was kidding, anyway? Colonel Majeskie wondered. It wasn't that easy to fool a full colonel, he decided firmly.

Major Pearson rubbed his wrists. He watched the other officers of the general's staff finish untying themselves. They all looked scared. Major Pearson, the senior officer on the staff was scared, too. But, more than that, he was furious. He wanted to strangle someone . . . and no one more than General Rush.

"Sir," Captain Renfro said, "do you really think the general had a choice? I mean, he was only doing his duty . . . ."

Major Pearson looked hard at Captain Renfro, a young Intelligence officer who had joined the general's staff only a week earlier and still held all generals in the greatest reverence. He looked at Captain Renfro and frowned. Intelligence . . . Jesus! thought Major Pearson, a Korean veteran, an infantry commander who had fought, and hated, his selection as General Rush's aide.
"It's not the general's goddamn duty, Renfro, to let his staff die," he said coldly.

"But, sir," Captain Renfro went on, getting up," he might have had to compromise the mission, otherwise."

Major Pearson laughed bitterly.

"How? Just how the hell could he have compromised this particular mission, Renfro? What do you suppose they wanted to know about the mission?"

Captain Renfro thought a moment. "Well . . . uh . . . ."

"They never said what they wanted to know," replied Major Perkins, a tall and gaunt Transportation officer.

"Exactly," said Major Pearson firmly. "They never said. The bastard intended to let us die without even asking what the VC wanted. That bastard's going to pay -- I swear he will."

"Well . . . ," Captain Renfro went on, thinking hard, "... it's my theory that they wanted to know where our troops are. That's what they used to ask Audie Murphy."

Major Pearson exploded. "You're crazy as hell, Renfro! Don't you think those bastards knew where our men were? Didn't you see the operation? Didn't you hear the operation? Jesus Christ, Renfro, how can you hide a goddamned circus?"

Captain Renfro pouted under the hard words. "Well, I'll tell you what," he said defensively, "I'll bet even Audie Murphy would've done what the general did."

Major Pearson had already started out of the clearing, fuming and mumbling.
"Major, sir?" Captain Renfro called after him. "Why do you think they didn't shoot us?"

Major Pearson didn't stop but muttered over his shoulder, "They didn't have enough rank."

As they emerged out of the little clearing, through a thin wall of trees, into an open paddy, Captain Renfro suddenly shouted, "VC! VC!"

The four men hit the ground and scrambled back into the bushes. "What the hell did you do that for?" Major Pearson growled under his breath.

"VC," Captain Renfro whispered, gulping noisily. His eyes were bugged out. "I saw some VC."

Everyone waited nervously and silently several minutes.

"You shouldn't have yelled, goddamnit." Major Pearson scowled at Captain Renfro, who blinked his eyes rapidly, petrified with fear. "Where are they?" Major Pearson demanded.

"Right out there in those bushes on the right."

Major Pearson checked his side-holster. His .45 was gone, of course. He felt helpless.

"What're we going to do?" whispered Captain Renfro.

Major Pearson stared straight ahead. All he could see was a bright glimpse of the wet paddy through a gap in the vines. "I'll try to see where they are," he said quietly and began inching forward slowly on his stomach.

"Shhhhh," Captain Renfro whispered nervously.

"Oh, shut up," Major Pearson growled, crawling up to
the hanging wall of vines. He parted them gently. All he
could see was the empty paddy, stretching out wet and muddy
to a distant dike. He turned back to Captain Renfro. "Where?"
he asked, wondering if Renfro had made it all up.

"In the bushes over on the right," the scared reply came
back.

Major Pearson again pushed aside the leaves and vines
and peered out. The other three officers held their breath.

Suddenly, Major Pearson was on his feet. "Oh, Jesus
Christ!" he yelled at Captain Renfro. "You imbecile!" He
stalked out of the woods into the paddy.

One by one, the others followed him. They found him
standing by a large clump of bushes, swearing loudly.

"There's your goddamned VC!" Major Pearson pointed
angrily into the bushes where the dead men lay, bloody and
still, their rifles scattered in the mud of the paddy.

The men stared.

Captain Renfro blinked, his mouth hanging open. "They
really are VC, aren't they?" he said in amazement.

Major Pearson glared at him. "Were, Renfro -- they were
VC. They're dead now."

Captain Renfro stared at the bodies, still blinking.

"I wonder how it happened?"

"There's a goddamned war going on, Renfro," Major Pearson
said coldly. "Hasn't anybody told you?" He turned and walked
out across the paddy, picking up one of the M-16's on the way.

"Where are you going?" Captain Renfro asked.
"Do you like it here?" Major Pearson said, still slogging through the paddy mud.

One by one, the officers picked up rifles and followed Major Pearson. Captain Renfro, unable to find an M-16, picked up a Chicom AK-47, never noticing the difference. He quickly ran to catch up with the others, looking back occasionally at the dead men and blinking.

Colonel Majeskie watched the ground as closely as he could from a thousand feet up. He had no intention of going through the terror and embarrassment of being shot down again. He could see the tiny specks that were the infantry men, slowly crossing the paddies that stretched out like a patchwork quilt, hundreds of perfect little green and shining squares.

"Are you sure you don't want to go lower?" the pilot yelled.

Colonel Majeskie pretended that he hadn't heard. He wished the supply clerk had packed him a map he could unfold and pretend to read. Instead, he had only the dog-eared copy of Ebony, and reading it didn't make him look very military. So Colonel Majeskie ignored the irritated pilot and read his dog-tags. He squinched his eyes up to look occupied. He could see the pilot frown and turn away.

"We've found nothing," a voice came over the radio. "I say again, search negative. Over." It was the infantry
on the ground. Colonel Majeskie had gotten so involved in reading his dogtags, he almost didn't hear. He picked up the handset. "Keep checking," he said. "Someone shot down those helicopters. Out."

He could tell that the pilot was becoming angry because he couldn't fly lower. Colonel Majeskie didn't care, though, and he decided to show the pilot, who he felt was typical of the maniacs who were turning this war into something unpleasant. Almost daring the sulking pilot to say something, he opened the copy of Ebony and started looking again at the pictures. They made him think of the laundry girls. Colonel Majeskie smiled thinking of the bare-bosomed laundry girls. But thinking of them brought up the image, or the non-image, of the hidden sniper. He shuddered and thumped the pilot's arm.

"Higher!" he yelled, terrified. "Higher!"

The pilot gritted his teeth and gunned the chopper up into the clouds, cursing under his breath.

The first platoon of "A" company had searched the woodline without success. Finally, Captain Adams brought over the rest of the company, and they all searched vainly for an hour or so. Finding nothing, they lay down and rested, tired and muddy. Captain Adams took his platoon leaders into a group to talk to them. The rest of the men relaxed in a half-circle around the clump of woods where the chopper had gone down.
PFC Caldwell stubbed his cigarette out against the side of a dike. "I don't know why the hell they keep our asses out lookin' for gooks, when we just wiped out a whole town of gooks." He spat and looked up at the sky, shading his eyes. "That crazy bastard colonel ain't the one that has to go walkin' through all this fuckin' mud." He grinned at PFC Ferguson. "I reckon if we had the old bastard down here, we'd teach him some manners, huh, Ferg?"

PFC Ferguson grinned. Both men looked up at Colonel Majeskie's chopper. Suddenly, PFC Caldwell was on his feet, pointing out across the paddy in front of them.

"Looka there, Ferg!"

Several other infantrymen joined them, as they all looked across the paddy.

"Are they gooks?" someone asked.

"Naw," PFC Caldwell said, squinting in the harsh sunlight. "But it may be one of them Red Chinese. 'Member when Cap'n Adams told us that big gook we caught that time was a Red Chink? 'Member, Ferg?"

PFC Ferguson grinned and nodded.

"Better call Cap'n Adams," someone said.

"Naaah," PFC Caldwell snorted. "We don't need nobody. We'll take 'em ourselves. Now, ever'body get down behind this here dike," he said. "And be ready to shoot."

The men crouched behind the dike, watching the approaching figures.
Major Pearson shaded his eyes and looked toward the woodline on the other side of the paddy. He held up his hand. "Wait. I thought I saw people over there."

The rest of the staff stopped and squinted across the paddy. They were tired, being used to desk jobs, and the bright sun was wearing them down. They all panted and wiped their faces.

"I thought I saw some men jump down behind that last dike," Major Pearson said.

"I need to go to the bathroom," said Captain Renfro, who fidgeted from foot to foot and bit his lip.

"There aren't any bathrooms here, Renfro," Major Pearson growled tiredly.

They all looked across the paddy again.

"Maybe we should surround them," Captain Renfro said, trying to get back in the major's good graces.

"Oh, Christ, Renfro," Major Pearson said disgustedly. "Four men don't surround. And, besides, we don't even know who they are." He looked distastefully at the captain. All he could see was two big eyes staring out of a mud-caked face, like a character in a black minstrel show. He thought Renfro looked ridiculous, not realizing his own face and clothes were as muddy from the crawling as the other officers'.
Captain Renfro pouted. "Well, at least we know they're not friendly . . . ."

"Now, how the hell do we know that, Renfro?" Major Pearson asked.

Captain Renfro looked very hurt. "'Cause nobody's friendly around here."

"Oh, Christ Jesus," Major Pearson muttered and stalked away.

The others followed, Captain Renfro pouting and walking behind.

Major Spenser, the chief surgeon at Third Evac Hospital, went over the report on the wounded chaplain. One clean hole in the chest. He cursed silently and threw the report down.

"Nurse!"

A Donut Dolly walked into the office.

"Yessir?"

Major Spenser looked for a long time at the short blonde girl in the candy-striped dress.

"What are you?" he said finally.

The girl smiled brightly. "I'm Doris. I'm helping the nurse today. And so is Roxie. We're Donut Dollies." The girl looked around. "But I don't see Roxie. I guess she's not here. But she is here today. I mean, she's here, but she's not right here . . . right now, I mean." The girl
stopped abruptly, looking puzzled.

Major Spenser was puzzled, too, and a little irritated at having this ridiculous girl foisted on him. "What do you know about medicine?" he asked her sharply.

The girl thought a moment, then frowned. "Well ... I know it tastes awful. Yuck!" She made a face.

Major Spenser wondered what had happened to his day. First, the Medivac chopper had landed, carrying the chaplain and Lieutenant St. James. Right away, Major Spenser had known it would be hard to salvage the day. There was nothing he could do for the chaplain, really -- he couldn't amputate a chest. And the lieutenant hadn't even been wounded at all, or at least he said he wasn't. Major Spenser had him examined anyway, knowing the way lieutenants lied on principle. He hoped the tests were positive, and that it would turn out the lieutenant was, indeed, wounded. He hoped it would be the lieutenant's foot. Major Spenser had been terribly upset after Spec Four Johnson had escaped with his miracle feet. Now, he really needed a good foot amputation -- it was all that could rescue the major from his dejection. So, the day hadn't started well, and now they had sent him a dummy like this . . . this . . .

"What did you say you were?" he asked. "A jelly roll?"

"A donut-dolly," the girl answered cheerfully. "My friend Roxie and I work for the Red Cross ... we hand out Kool-Aid and donuts to the men. Did you know we were out on
that operation?" She shook her head and smiled. "Boy, it sure was exciting!"

"Not very," Major Spenser snorted. He looked at the short blonde girl, who stood blinking her big eyes and smiling and dancing from foot to foot as if she had a urinary infection. Major Spenser suddenly had an idea. "Look, how would you like to have some good practical medical experience?"

The girl gasped. "Who, me?"

Major Spenser saw a way to get rid of two of his problems and perhaps straighten out his day somewhat. "I'll tell you what," he said, "I'm going to turn this wounded chaplain over to you and your friend. The nurse will put a bandage on him and set up oxygen tanks. All you have to do then is to be sure he's getting enough to eat and drink and breathe."

The girl nodded eagerly and clapped her hands. "Oh, goody, goody! Oh, how can I thank you, Doctor?"

Major Spenser looked at her as one might look at a dancing bear, puzzled and bored. "I think you'd better go look at your patient. He may already be dead."

The girl gasped. "Oh my goodness!" She streaked out of the room.

Major Spenser smiled. It was the first break of the day, and it had worked splendidly. He took out a shiny scalpel and picked his fingernails as he thought about the chaplain. He had had chaplains before, and they all thought
they were God's gift to the army. Actually, as far as Major Spenser was concerned, chaplains were a pain in the ass — so damned trusting and stoic and reverent. They took the drama out of the doctor's hands and put it into God's. This irked Major Spenser, who knew that, with one deft slice, he could take God's power into his own hands and show the wounded chaplains a thing or two. Major Spenser had no time for chaplains.

Of course, he had to admit, it wasn't just chaplains. Major Spenser realized that he hated all his patients. Except the amputees. They were the only ones worthy of the name "patient". They were the brave ones, the poor boys whose lives would never be the same again. Seeing them actually brought tears to Major Spenser's eyes. He often had to wipe his eyes on his sleeve in order to even see the limbs, broken and mangled, that he was lopping off.

And he had to admit that the actual cutting had a lot to do with his staying a war surgeon. Apart from his human sympathy and pity for the men whose limbs were injured so horribly, there was something else in Major Spenser that loved the actual severing of limb from torso. There was something about the resistance of flesh and muscle and bone to the inevitability of the saw's edge that sent chills up the surgeon's back. Yes, it was a fine, exciting, and yet humane, job. Major Spenser wouldn't dream of being anything else.
He had even joined the army and given up the high fees of a civilian practice just to come to Viet Nam, where he knew arms and legs were dropping like flies. He had been here for five years and would stay, he had decided, until the last mine had mangled the last foot. He was one of life's few truly satisfied workers, having combined work and pleasure in a meaningful way. He smiled and thought of the poem by Robert Frost about joining one's vocation and one's avocation, one's work and one's play. He felt he could be proud and he was.

But today had been a bad day. Even though he had managed to get rid of a couple of nuisances, the girl and the chaplain, it was still a day of nothingness. And the worst part of it was that these monotonous days were becoming the pattern. With the big troop withdrawals going on all the time, fewer and fewer Medivac choppers were sent out to retrieve wounded men. The days were boring. They were simply no more good operations. And all signs pointed toward the worst. Not only had he been forced to scrap his plans of publishing an article in the *AMA Journal* about Spec Four Johnson's amazing feet, but that same august journal had sent him an "overdue" notice that week on his subscription.

After all this, after the day's disappointments, Major Spenser was beginning to feel that perhaps he was in the wrong place at the wrong time again. It had happened at least once before, the time he had moved from Chicago to
Milwaukee out of boredom and a plane had fallen a week later out of O'Hare in Chicago — eighty-four people dead, arms and legs twisted and crushed, begging to be sawed . . . and he had just moved away. As he thought of it now, it almost made him cry. And here he was in a war, for God's sake, and the action still seemed to be somewhere else.

"Crap!" he said aloud and got up. He walked over to a footlocker and took out a stick of wood about eight inches thick and three feet long, like a good-sized piece of firewood. He put one end on his desk and rested the other on a chair-back. Then he opened a desk drawer and took out a gleaming saw. He tested the blade on his arm and cut himself.

"Crap," he muttered and wiped away the blood.

Major Spenser set his watch down on the desk, where he could see the face easily.

"One," he said. He gripped the saw and swung his arm to limber up.

"Two." He leaned over the wood, putting one hand on it to steady it.

Watching the hands on the watch, he suddenly yelled "Three!" and began sawing furiously. Sawdust flew as he sawed. Sweat broke on his forehead. As he got almost through the wood, he started frantically watching the watch and sawed even more furiously.

The wood suddenly gave way and dropped noisily in two pieces onto the floor. Major Spenser dropped at the same
time, as he had been leaning on the wood, and fell noisily onto the floor.

"I did it!" he yelled. "Yee-hoo! Sixteen seconds!"
He lay on the floor and threw sawdust in the air. "Sixteen! Hee, hee, hee!"

Suddenly, the door opened. Doris, the blond runty Donut-Dolly, stood there staring at the fallen surgeon groveling and singing in the sawdust. "Sir?" She edged forward cautiously.

"A new record!" Major Spenser giggled. "Hee, hee, hee!"

The girl looked around the room, puzzled. Finally she shrugged. "Well, anyway, you're supposed to come down to Emergency right away and look at the other man."

Major Spenser got to his feet, still shaky from the exertion. He dusted the sawdust off his white smock.

"What other man? The lieutenant? I've already looked at him."

"No," Doris said. "It was another one."

Major Spenser stopped dusting himself and straightened up. "Another one? Besides the chaplain and the lieutenant?"

Doris nodded. "Uh huh. His name was, uh, Ping or something like that. I can't for sure remember . . . ."

Major Spenser stared at the girl a long time before asking slowly, "What's wrong with him?"
Doris made a face. "Oooh, it's awful. They said he stepped on a mine or something. Oooh, his foot... oooh..."

Major Spenser had to sit down. The smile started as twitches at the corners of his mouth and pulled his lips up, until finally his mouth fell open, and a great rebel yell climbed out toward the ceiling. Major Spenser leaped up, grabbing his saw, and ran out the door.

Doris the Donut-Dolly blinked. She stared after the fleeing surgeon a moment, then shrugged her shoulders and left.

Barton Halser woke up on the floor of a helicopter that was carrying the infantry back to basecamp. When his eyes first popped open, he saw several muddy soldiers sitting over him on the fold-out canvas seats of the chopper. The helicopter itself had no doors and let the wind at a thousand feet whip through and chill the wet occupants.

Barton shivered. He realized where he was but didn't try to get up. There was no seat for him, and, besides, he really wanted to gather his thoughts and try to sort them. All he could remember was bodies, burned and broken and torn apart. He lay on the cold metal floor, staring up at the dark wires that snaked along the roof of the chopper. A face loomed out at him, out of the darkness, staring with
burned, empty eye-sockets. Barton turned his head toward the front of the chopper and felt like vomiting. He closed his eyes and passed out, this time from exhaustion.

When he awoke the next morning, Barton headed straight for General Rush's headquarters. He wasn't sure who had been in charge of the over-all operation, but he felt he should find out and get permission to write his story. What he would write was another thing altogether. Barton knew it was his job, but right now his mind was cluttered with nothing but burned bodies. He couldn't piece it all together. There were dozens of grisly pictures, but none of them seemed to have captions.

As he sat outside the general's office, his stomach twitched. He could feel the burned-out, sightless eyes peering over his shoulder. He wondered fearfully if they would ever go away.

"Yes. What the hell do you want?"

Barton looked up. General Rush was standing in the door of his office, clad only in an infantry-blue towel that strained to circumnavigate his ample waist.

"G-General Rush?" Barton asked meekly, seeing no insignia on the towel.

"In the flesh."

"Uh, yes . . . I, uh, see, sir . . . ," Barton stuttered.

"Well, what is it?" General Rush demanded.
Barton tried to keep from staring. He glanced at the ceiling. "I'm a journalist, sir . . . I . . . ."

"Can't look a man in the eyes, can you?" General Rush snorted. Nobody had to tell him the man was a reporter. "Well, what the hell is it you want?"

"I, uh, I wanted to talk to you, sir. I'm from Cleveland . . . ."

General Rush walked to the hall door. He cared nothing about the man's childhood. He stuck his head out the door and yelled. "Hartley!"

Barton stood up, startled.

General Rush came back across the room. He glanced at the reporter. "Your name Hartley?"

Barton shook his head.

"Then sit down," General Rush growled. "Hartley's head of Intelligence. He'll talk to you. That way, I won't have to listen to a bunch of goddamned idiot questions. Tell 'em to Hartley." He turned and went back into his office.

Barton heard a girl giggle from inside the general's office. He looked at his watch. Ten-twenty. Suddenly, a tall, thin major sped in from the hall and stood panting. After a moment, he caught his breath and leaned against a desk.

"Where's the general?" he asked Barton, still wheezing. Barton pointed at the general's door.

"Any idea what he wanted?" Major Hartley asked.
"He wanted you to talk to me. You see," Barton said, "I'm a journalist, and I was out with the operation yesterday . . . ."

"What do you want to know?"

"Well, I . . . I guess, actually, I just want to get permission to write my story."

Major Hartley looked hard at the reporter. He felt more confident since he'd found out the general wasn't after him.

"What are you going to write?" he asked, narrowing his eyes harshly, the way Captain Watson of the artillery had shown him. "Not any of that biased crap, I hope."

Barton looked up innocently. "I . . . I don't know really what to write. What I saw was so horrible, it was indescribable. All those people burned and bloody and all. I vomited, it was so awful," he admitted unashamed. "I mean . . . I know this is a war, but . . . ."

"That's right," Major Hartley said firmly and sharply. He walked over to the big tactical map on the wall. "This is a war," he said. "See this red circle right here?" He pointed with his finger toward a circle surrounding a black dot. "The black dot is a village." Barton stood beside the major, nodding. He squinted to read the name of the black dot.

"Exactly," Major Hartley said. "But do you know what that red circle means?" Barton shook his head. "It means the village" -- Major Hartley thumped the black dot -- "the village is in a no-fire zone, which means just what it says."

He walked over and poured a cup of coffee from the coffee pot. "Now, that's the kind of biased crap I was talking about. A lot of reporters would put two and two together and come up with a lot of dead civilians. And that kind of sensationalism isn't good for anybody, because somebody would catch hell for shooting up a friendly village. Now, you're not going to write any of that kind of biased crap, are you?"

He smiled at Barton, who stood speechless before the map, staring and shaking his head. Major Hartley turned around to pour another cup of coffee. "Cream and sugar?" he asked without turning around. "Or just black?"

He smiled as he heard the door close. Sounds of vomiting came from the hall and then feet running wildly out of hearing. "Here's to you, Majeskie," Major Hartley said, raising his cup and picturing Colonel Majeskie stripped naked in a court-martial and turned over at last to angry hordes of Vietnamese.

Suddenly, the door to General Rush's office swung open. A tall, dark-haired Donut-Dolly walked out, straightening her clothes. She winked a Major Hartley and went on out into the hall. General Rush came huffing out a moment later.

"Where's the goddamned reporter?"
"He left, sir." Major Hartley held out a cup. "Care for some coffee, sir?"

"Did that sonofabitch ask you about that operation?"

"He was there, sir. He wanted permission to write his story."

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him he could," Major Hartley said confidently, thinking of Colonel Majeskie ripped apart by the peasants.

"Coffee, sir?"

General Rush glared at him.

"Wipe the goddamned smile off your face, Hartley, you presumptuous bastard." Major Hartley's face fell instantly. "That was a piss-poor excuse for an operation," General Rush growled. He was ashamed of the whole mess and had every intention of wiping it from the records.

"Well, sir," Major Hartley stammered, "I don't think he'll write anything he shouldn't . . . I mean, you know how most of them make things look better than they are . . . ."

"Humph!" General Rush snorted. His brow furrowed suddenly in thought. He looked up. "Where's the prisoner?"

Major Hartley was puzzled. "Prisoner?"

General Rush frowned. "Hell, yes, prisoner. You're head of Intelligence. You should know."

Major Hartley was disturbed. He knitted his eyebrows.

"But, sir," he protested. "I'm head of Operations, not Intelligence."
General Rush glared at him. "You're damned lucky you're not, Hartley -- because you came very close to being relieved. Who is head of Intelligence?"

Major Hartley thought a moment. "I'm... not sure." He snapped his fingers. "I'll look on the chart!"

General Rush frowned. "Good thinking, Hartley. Maybe you should be head of Intelligence."

Major Hartley ran his finger down the chain-of-command chart on the wall. "Let's see... G-1 is personnel... G-2... ah! G-2... here it is... the G-2 is..."

He stood up, looking dumbly at the chart a moment before turning around.

"Well, who is it?" General Rush demanded.

"It's classified, sir," Major Hartley said softly, waiting for the general to yell at him.

"Classified's ass!" General Rush yelled at him.

"Yessir, it really is." Major Hartley put his finger on the chart. "Here it is. G-2... Intelligence... classified Top Secret."

General Rush frowned again and thought a moment. "Well, go find out," he said at last.

"Uh... who do I... I mean, how...?"

"How is your problem, Hartley," General Rush growled. "Someone has to know who the hell the G-2 is?"

"Yessir." Major Hartley gulped. He turned and walked into the hall, wondering how he could find out who the G-2 was.
General Rush stood in the outer office, wondering why it had never occurred to him to wonder who the G-2 was. He couldn't recall having ever spoken to the head of the Intelligence section. Perhaps that had something to do with his never knowing the man. General Rush snorted. He had little use for a head of Intelligence, anyway. He had other ways of getting information.

He had heard that morning from his housegirl, Suzie, that a prisoner had been taken at Rong Song. He had, in fact, been grilling the girl to find out the name of another Viet Cong-infested village. General Rush had decided that, with a more competent staff and a better brigade commander, he might actually be able to enjoy an operation, as a general should do. Suzie had been crying all morning about the destruction of Rong Song. General Rush hadn't believed for a minute her obviously-contrived story about having cousins there. Hell, she had been the one who had told him about the VC at Rong Song. Of course, he reasoned, it would be to her advantage to act upset over the blasting of the village, so the VC wouldn't suspect her as an informer. And General Rush had to admit Suzie did a good job of it, rolling on the floor and wailing. It had finally gotten so embarrassing, General Rush had given her a dollar just to hush her up.

As she tucked the dollar into her blouse, Suzie had sniffled and said that one of her favorite uncles had been
the only survivor, and she had heard from friends that he had been taken prisoner. General Rush knew the uncle bit was a lot of crap, but he felt Suzie was using her own sort of code to tell him about the prisoner. He winked to show her he understood. The girl had broken down and run from the room, shouting terrible-sounding Vietnamese curses at him. General Rush, realizing he was going to get nowhere with the girl, had left.

He chuckled as he thought about the girl and her mourning act. That Suzie was quite a girl, all right, but she tended to overdo the emotional thing a bit. He supposed she was really, despite being a good spy, just another Jap at heart.

"Sir!" Major Hartley puffed excitedly as he charged back into the room. "I found out who it is! It's Major Virelli. At least, that's what PFC Spearman said." Major Hartley felt quite proud to have tracked down the G-2 so quickly. "Spearman used to be in Intelligence. Or at least he said he was."

General Rush raised his eyebrows. "Bring him in." He really couldn't imagine why Major Virelli should be a prisoner. General Rush knew Major Virelli was a foreigner and a sneaky bastard, but he didn't even know he'd been near Rong Song. The general knew he hadn't told Virelli about the operation, but he supposed all foreigners had connections with each other, a sort of grapevine. It was entirely possible that Virelli was a Jap at heart, too, and that he had
been taken prisoner at Rong Song. Served the bastard right.

"But, sir," Major Hartley protested. "He won't come."

"What in hell do you mean he won't come?"

"He says it's not him. He says it must be someone else."

It greatly irritated General Rush that Major Virelli wouldn't admit to being a prisoner. "You go tell that foreign bastard he's under arrest if he's not here in two minutes."

Major Hartley saluted nervously and left.

General Rush sat down and took a sip of Major Hartley's coffee. He glanced at the spoon he was using to stir and noticed, as he put it into his pocket, that it was from Hong Kong, where Hartley had taken his R&R. General Rush wondered vaguely if Hartley was getting communistic, hanging around with Japs in Hong Kong. As he mused over Hartley's possible subversiveness, the general heard a faint rapping at the door.

"Come in, Hartley!" General Rush roared. "It's your own damned office." General Rush thought it foolish for Major Hartley to knock on his own door. He was preparing to yell again when the door opened slowly inward.

As General Rush watched in slight amazement, a bent and dirty old Vietnamese man entered, limping and clothed in ragged pants. He had on no shirt, and his bony shoulders curved forward around his skinny, sunken chest. His hands were clenched together in front of him, as if he were praying.

General Rush eyed the man suspiciously. He thought the old fellow looked as if he would burst out crying any minute.
Oh Lord, General Rush thought, not another one of these damned squealing Vietnamese. He made up his mind quickly and decisively to boot the bastard's butt out if he so much as shed a drop.

"Ah . . . ah . . .," the old man began, his bottom lip tremblind. "Ah . . . ah . . ." Tears welled up in his puffy, red eyes.

General Rush glared at the man. How could these people ever get ahead, he wondered, if they refused to learn English? It irritated him that the Vietnamese couldn't speak English. What made it even worse was that they had picked a ching-chang language like Vietnamese. Hell, even babies in the U.S. could speak English.

"What the hell do you want?" General Rush demanded, anxious to get back to looking for the Rong Song prisoner and the G-2.

The old man nodded, then shook his head, lifting his hands and letting them drop. Finally, he stood sadly wagging his head in utter bewilderment.

General Rush decided the man was insane. Even for a Vietnamese, he was stupid. General Rush walked to the door and yelled: "Hartley! Get in here!"

Within seconds, Major Hartley was standing in the doorway, out of breath and panting. "He won't come, sir," he said.

"Who won't come?"
"Major Virelli. He still says it's not him."

"Never mind Virelli," General Rush said, pointing to the old man. "Find out what this bastard wants."

Major Hartley looked at the old man. He narrowed his eyes.

"What do you want, you bastard?"


Major Hartley asked the man the question in his own language. The old man mumbled a reply, shaking his head pitifully. Major Hartley turned to the general.

"He says he wants his family back."

General Rush scowled disgustedly. "Well, they damned sure don't live here." He felt quite sure he would know if any gook family was holed up in his headquarters. Unless Major Virelli had married one of them, being foreign himself, and had moved the whole family in. He looked at the old man and decided the latter wasn't an irate husband -- not enough backbone.

"He says they're all dead," Major Hartley said.

General Rush was getting genuinely angry. "What does the sonofabitch think I am -- a faith healer? Get him out of here, Hartley." Actually, General Rush was somewhat disappointed, even to this day, by the fact that he wasn't a faith healer. As a young colonel, he had often sat and conjectured on the strange powers that automatically fall,
or perhaps, descend, upon the newly-starred epaulets of a
general. He had been shocked to discover there were so few.
It had been a great disillusionment.

"They were at Rong Song," Major Hartley said, as the
old man continued to mumble and sob.

"Well, no damn wonder they're dead!"

"He says his family wasn't Viet Cong."

General Rush frowned. "Then what in hell were they
doing in a VC village?" He was constantly amazed at the gall
of the Vietnamese, always so sure they could put something
over on someone. It just wasn't that damned easy to fool a
*general*, by God.

Major Hartley paled a little and stammered.

"He, uh . . . he says . . . he says *you* killed them

...."

General Rush was astonished. He didn't even *know* the
bastard's family. "Get that bastard out of here!" he roared.

"Sir! Look out!" Major Hartley yelled suddenly.

General Rush jumped behind his desk. Major Hartley
was already there.

"What the hell's going on?" the general growled.

"He's got a knife!" Major Hartley trembled in terror.
"I saw him pull a knife!"

General Rush peeked up over the top of the desk. The
old man had a knife in his hand. He hadn't moved an inch,
and his eyes were noticeably brightened by fresh tears. The
general ducked back down angrily. "Go get my pistol," he growled. "It's over on that chair across the room."

Major Hartley gasped. "Over there?"

General Rush frowned. "You want to stay here and get knifed, Hartley?"

Major Hartley shook his head vigorously. He had no desire to be knifed anywhere. He hunkered down behind the desk, thinking quickly. "I know," he said, "let's surrender. We have our Geneva Convention cards -- we'd be treated humanely."

He spoke quickly, warming to his suggestion. "All we have to do is say 'chu hoi'."

General Rush glowered. "Where's your back-bone, Hartley? Now, get out there!" He shoved the major out into the room.

"Chu hoi! Chu hoi!" Major Hartley yelled, holding both his hands high in the air.

The old man shook his head sadly. He put the knife to his throat and mumbled, sobbing all the while.

Major Hartley suddenly grinned and began dancing around the room. He was delighted. "It's him he's going to kill! Not us!" he giggled, clapping his hands. "He's going to kill himself." Major Hartley was so relieved that he didn't notice General Rush standing up and glaring at him.

"Wipe the goddamn smile off your face, Hartley," the general said gruffly. "You want gook-blood all over your carpet?"

The thought of stains on his Hong Kong carpet sobered Major Hartley. He had picked up the rug on R&R for next to
nothing, but it would be worth a fortune back home. He looked at the old man, who stood weeping with the knife at his throat. Quickly, seeing an opening, Major Hartley leaped at the man and wrestled the knife easily away from him. The old man lay crumpled and crying on the floor.

"Now, why don't you get that crazy bastard out of here, Hartley. We've got work to do," General Rush said firmly. "Tell Virelli he's got two minutes to turn himself in."

It was ridiculous to have a dangerous prisoner like Major Virelli running loose and getting full PX privileges.

Major Hartley saluted and dragged the old man out and dumped him in the hall. Then he walked down to Major Virelli's office.

"Virelli, you'd better get on down to the general's office. He still thinks you're the G-2."

Major Alphonso Virelli slammed his fist disgustedly on his desk. "If I was the G-2, I'd know it, wouldn't I?"

"Probably not," Major Hartley replied. "It's classified."

"I'm the Transportation Officer, goddamnit!"

Major Hartley shrugged. "You might be some kind of double agent, or something."

"Horseshit!" Major Virelli rose and stormed into the hall. He banged open the door to General Rush's office, where he was immediately grabbed by two large M.P.'s, who dragged him away down the hall.

Major Hartley looked down the hall, too, where the protesting screams were just dying out. "I guess he was the G-2." He was still confused as to why being G-2 was so bad. He hoped he was never given the job.

General Rush looked a little startled. "The G-2? A goddamned VC for a G-2?" He shook his head and stepped over the old man, who sat in the hallway sobbing and holding the knife to his throat. General Rush couldn't believe his Intelligence officer had been a VC at Rong Song. But, war was war, he knew. He turned to Major Hartley. "Send the old man to see Majeskie -- he doesn't have a carpet. And, by the way, you're the G-2 now." He stepped into his office and closed the door.

Major Hartley sat down with the old Vietnamese man and whimpered, wishing he had a knife to put to his own throat.

Colonel Majeskie chewed his pencil. The wording wouldn't come right. He wondered if he should start, "Like the gallant hero he is . . ." or simply, "Because of conspicuous gallantry . . . ." One couldn't be too careful, he decided, and wrote, "Because of his customary, conspicuous gallantry and courageous heroism . . . ." He looked at what he had written and smiled. A silver star, at the very least. He thought of General Rush and smiled even more. Ha-ha-ha, General Rush, he thought happily.
"A medal for what, Majeskie?" General Rush had asked suspiciously.

"For heroism, sir," Colonel Majeskie had answered proudly.

General Rush had laughed so long and so hard that Colonel Majeskie had become afraid the general might fall out of his chair and hurt himself before he'd had a chance to approve the medal. "Sir . . . ," he had said, anxiously leaning forward. "Sir . . . uh . . . be careful . . . ."

General Rush had straightened up after a few minutes to tell Colonel Majeskie to leave.

Ha-ha, yourself, thought Colonel Majeskie as he sat thumping his pencil on his desk. The general didn't have to approve it; Colonel Majeskie would write it and approve it himself. He couldn't really understand why General Rush would oppose giving medals to those who deserved them, unless he was keeping them all for himself. It had been a tough operation, and for General Rush to hog all the medals was unfair. Why, every man in the field that day deserved a medal, Colonel Majeskie thought, bitterly imagining the general wearing the medals like a suit of golden armor. Then he thought about all the men in the brigade sporting medals like lapel flowers. The thought startled him. Colonel Majeskie knew enough about enlisted men to know they would hock the medals as soon as they needed a little money.
He yelled for Sergeant Hightower. "Cancel all medals for the men," he said when the sergeant came in.

Sergeant Hightower looked surprised. "I didn't know they were getting any medals." He couldn't remember anyone in the brigade ever getting a medal before, except the colonel himself, and that had been Private Bing's medal.

"They're not," Colonel Majeskie replied firmly.

Sergeant Hightower looked curiously at the colonel, then turned and walked out of the office, feeling more strongly than ever that the colonel was an incompetent bastard who should be put on permanent latrine duty.

"In fact," Colonel Majeskie roared, "I may put them all on permanent latrine duty!" He thought angrily of the ungrateful infantrymen hocking their medals. He seethed as he watched Sergeant Hightower walk silently out of the office and slam the door. "Incompetent bastard," Colonel Majeskie muttered. He couldn't help being mad. The very idea of giving medals to privates was vulgar. They all deserved latrine duty for even trying to get medals. They should stick to fighting.

But then, Colonel Majeskie remembered that he had never planned to give any medals to the men. He felt better. He started to call Sergeant Hightower back to tell him to cancel the order cancelling medals for the men. Instead, he went back to composing the recommendation for his own medal. He didn't look up until two hours later, when he closed it.
"In the midst of devastating enemy fire," he wrote, savoring each word, "Colonel Majeskie bravely directed the ground operation with such efficiency that a major Viet Cong stronghold was completely annihilated."

Colonel Majeskie sat back and surveyed what he had written. Six pages. Hardly enough, he thought, but a suitable outline. The men at Awards and Decorations could use their imaginations to fill in the rest. He put it on the desk.

"Hightower!"

Sergeant Hightower came into the room, looking disgusted, as he always did when he looked at Colonel Majeskie.

"Take this and get it typed and sent off to Awards and Decorations as soon as possible."

Sergeant Hightower took the papers and looked at them. Then he looked at the colonel.

"What is this?"

Colonel Majeskie sat back in his chair and smiled, folding his arms across his chest.

"It's a recommendation for a medal."

Sergeant Hightower eyed the papers suspiciously.

"For who?" he asked, finally.

"For me," Colonel Majeskie replied proudly.

"From who?"

"From the United States government in sincere appreciation for services rendered in the face of the enemy."
Sergeant Hightower looked incredulously at the colonel. 

"Who wrote the recommendation?"

Colonel Majeskie smiled. "I did."

Sergeant Hightower glared at him and shook the paper.

"You can't write a recommendation for yourself."

Colonel Majeskie was taken aback. "Who else knows as much about what I did as I do?"

Sergeant Hightower frowned and walked out of the office after throwing the papers on the floor.

Colonel Majeskie shook his head gravely. He was sorry that Hightower was so jealous. He picked up the papers and put them in an envelope. Then he dropped it into his mailbox to be sent out. What right, he wondered, did desk-jockeys like Hightower have expecting medals, anyway?

Colonel Majeskie leaned back in his chair and put his feet on his desk. You would have had to have been there, he mused, there in the heart of the battle, flying through the flak at a hundred feet, feeling the chopper spinning away with you into the deep mud of the paddy, bursting into a flaming ball behind you as you dove over a dike.

Colonel Majeskie found himself shaking like a leaf. He could almost feel the desk, like the chopper, jolting along through the sky, waiting for the bullet. He waited, sweat rolling down his face as he thought suddenly of the back window. Too late he turned to the window, his heart bouncing into his throat.
What he saw stopped his heart completely. A Vietnamese man, old and bent, stood outside the window, brandishing a knife and staring at the window. Colonel Majeskie, terrified, fell back onto his desk. The downward pressure somehow set off the steel flap and catapulted him out the front door. As he flew, the sun-baked Vietnamese face seemed to follow him through the air.

Major Hartley was drawing aimlessly on a memo pad at his new desk when he heard a commotion in the hall outside. He got up and closed the door and came back to the desk. The manuals that were stacked on his new desk were piled in swaying columns that seemed ready to topple on him at any minute. He sat and stared through the stacks and felt like a prisoner gazing miserably out through bars. Suddenly, Major Hartley lurched forward, flailing his arms about wildly. The stacks crumbled, and books flew across the floor and banged against the wall. He glared at them, his nostrils contorting and puffing angrily. He surveyed the mess. Then he dropped his head into his hands and sobbed. The noise outside, all the yelling that filled the hall, added to his misery. Major Hartley had never been quite so downright miserable. He hated his new job.

He knew absolutely nothing about being the G-2. Intelligence -- the very word was ominous. The manuals General Rush had sent to him didn't help at all. In fact, Major
Hartley hadn't even opened them. Intelligence was a thing you either had or didn't have -- no manual could teach it. He had dropped out of college after three years, and now it had come back to haunt him.

The men in the Intelligence section sneered behind his back, he knew. He could feel their disdain, their contempt -- he could spot it in their words and looks. They hated him because they were all more intelligent than he was. He moaned. No wonder they resented his being head of Intelligence! Lewiston had a master's degree in English and quoted Shakespeare. Perry had a degree in history. Even Fat Robertson was a college graduate of some sort. Just that morning Lewiston had laid a sealed packet labelled TOP SECRET on Major Hartley's desk and then had stood there grinning while Major Hartley had mumbled that he didn't have the TOP SECRET clearance to open it. He couldn't even open his own mail! And Virelli had held down the job of Transportation officer, too! Major Hartley moaned as he thought of not being able to open his classified mail. It seemed cruel for a person to be made head of Intelligence when he doubted his own.

Major Hartley dried his eyes and pulled open a desk drawer. He sniffled and took out one of the many dog-eared intelligence tests he had found in an old file. They were designed to test the aptitudes of new recruits during World War II, but Major Hartley found them to be distressingly difficult. He had read them all so many times that even the
directions threw him now. He hadn't found the answer sheets, and his anxiety over not knowing whether "Read Right" was a hint or a threat exasperated and frightened him. Major Hartley put the tests back into the drawer and groaned. He thought in horror of the future day when some high command would demand to know his score on the intelligence test, and he would have to take it and fail miserably. He would be laughed out of the army -- the head of Intelligence failing the intelligence test.

Major Hartley sighed heavily and looked at the sealed brown envelope lying among the jumbled books on the floor. It was marked TOP SECRET, and the broad black letters seemed to form a hideous, mocking grin. A sudden feverish desire took hold of Major Hartley. He had to open it! By God, he thought, it's addressed to the G-2, and I'm the G-2! He decided if he couldn't open his own goddamned mail, nobody could. But he decided firmly that he could . . . and would.

Major Hartley pushed his chair back violently and leaped over his desk, hardly noticing the loud pounding that had started at his door. He grabbed the envelope and sat down amid the scattered books. Grinning demonically, Major Hartley felt his hands go sweaty with excitement. To hell with them all! he thought, but just as he was preparing to rip open the envelope, he heard the door fly open and his name being called.

"Major Hartley, I presume!"
Major Hartley sat among the books, the letter held in both hands, and looked up into the stern eyes of Senator Wayland Mathew Jefferson.

"Having fun, Major?"

Senator Jefferson glared down at Major Hartley, staring out of harsh, beady black eyes set prominently in his small, balding head, like coal in a skinny snowman's face. He was short and wiry and wore tiny wire-rimmed glasses that seemed to focus his stare into a bright cutting point, like a magnifying glass with light.

Major Hartley sat under the penetrating ray of the Senator's sight and blinked. His excitement had dissipated very quickly, and he sat now like a rock, unmoving and dumb. A sort of deep, internal embarrassment had crept up and clamped his vocal cords.

"Head of Intelligence?" Senator Jefferson said. "Is that you, Major?" he demanded.

Major Hartley stared helplessly at the senator's belt-buckle and heard the snickers of Lewiston and Pat Robertson polluting the hall outside. The senator went on talking.

"Where's General Rush?"

Major Hartley shook his head dumbly.

"You're head of Intelligence, Major. Don't you know where the general is? If you know what's good for you," he continued, spewing angrily, "you'll tell me where the god-damned general is, Major."
Major Hartley shook his head again. He didn't know who the bald man was, but he felt sure it was someone important—he had never heard a general blasphemed so publicly.

"I'm Senator Jefferson, Major, and you tell your general when you see him that someone around here is in deep trouble." He turned to leave but looked back around suspiciously. "You are the G-2, aren't you?" he demanded.

Major Hartley shook his head meekly. He could see Lewiston and Fat Robertson and the other men crowding around Senator Jefferson, nodding their heads vigorously. The senator turned on his heel sharply and left, surrounded by the nodding men. The door slammed shut after them.

Major Hartley stared sadly as the group left the room. Just as he felt tears welling up again, the door opened, and Lewiston walked in and took the envelope marked TOP SECRET from the major's hands and left again, slamming the door.

Major Hartley sat among the useless books and sniffled and bit his lip and wished Major Virelli was still the G-2.

"Read the story for yourself, General." Senator Jefferson slapped the paper down on General Rush's desk.

General Rush skimmed over the story. "Bullshit!" he exclaimed. "Biased bullshit!" He swept the paper off his desk and looked hard at the senator. "What the hell makes you think my men did this?"

Senator Jefferson stared back hard at the general.
"I talked to that reporter, General. He told me himself he talked to you and to Major Hartley, your Operations officer, and now your Intelligence officer. And he was there. He saw the whole massacre. What do you think of that?"

The two men glared at each other a moment, trying to stare each other down.

"I think Hartley's a lying sonofabitch, even if he is the G-2," General Rush said firmly. "And I think that reporter is a biased sonofabitch to write trash like this about the men who are protecting his chicken ass." He glared at the senator. "And I think you're a crazy sonofabitch to even think there was a massacre."

Senator Jefferson bit down hard on his cigar.

"No massacre? You deny that your men massacred a friendly village?"

"Damned right I do." General Rush knew for a fact there were no friendly villages in Viet Nam. And he had no idea who the hell the reporter was who had written the biased crap. The only reporter he remembered was some babbling idiot who had fainted or something at Rong Song, and he knew that was a VC village. "Damned right I do. I deny it all. I'll bring that lying sonofabitch Hartley in here and let him tell you." He walked to the door and yelled.

A face appeared at the door. It was Fat Robertson. He grinned broadly. "Major Hartley's not here, sir."
"Where the hell's he gone?" General Rush demanded.

"Berserk, sir," grinned Eat Robertson.

"Where's that?"

"It's not a place, sir. It's a . . . a . . . ," Fat Robertson stuttered, his grin fading rapidly.

"What the hell do you mean it's not a place?" General Rush demanded in a roar. He disliked word-games and fat people. "How the hell did he go if it's not a place?"

"He . . . uh . . . he took your jeep, sir, but I don't mean . . . I mean . . . he did take your jeep, but he was already there, really . . . uh, berserk, I mean . . . he took your jeep because he . . . was there . . . ." Fat Robertson wished he had never stuck his head through the open door.

General Rush pounded his desk. "Where the hell did he take my jeep, goddamnit?" he roared.

"To Saigon, sir," Fat Robertson said quickly. "He took it to Saigon."

General Rush spoke in a calmer, more pleasant growl. "Saigon? How the hell do you know he went to Saigon?"

"He . . . he . . . said he was going to the airport and hijack a plane home, sir."

General Rush blinked.

"Whoever put that crazy bastard in Intelligence?"

Fat Robertson gulped. "You did, sir."
General Rush glared suspiciously at the fat clerk. "What the hell did he make on his test?"

"What test?" Fat Robertson looked around for an escape.

"The intelligence test, goddamnit. What kind of a test do you think the head of Intelligence would take?"

"I . . . I . . . don't guess he ever took one . . . ."

General Rush grunted and turned to the senator. "See there, Jefferson, the sonofabitch lied his way into being G-2. Never even took the test. And he's a deserter, besides."

Senator Jefferson narrowed his eyes.

"I don't think we're talking simply about Major Hartley, General. A thing like this goes deeper. We have to get to the bottom of it, before the culprit disappears into the great military complex. And I will find my man, whether he is a private" -- he leaned closer -- "or a general."

"Well," General Rush said firmly, "you won't find him, because there never was an operation in this division where a bunch of innocent goddamned Jap civilians were massacred."

Senator Jefferson smiled.

"We shall see, General, we shall see."

Senator Wayland Mathew Jefferson was not a newcomer to the military. In high school, he had compiled a scrapbook on the Civil War and had gotten an "A" on it. When World War Two had broken out, he had been teaching mathematics
in a Georgia junior college. And, in the Korean War, he had gone back to school to take a master's in psychology. While there, he had read several studies on the psychological aspects of war and had personally run an experiment using white rats that had borne out most of his suspicions about the army, suspicions later to harden into convictions.

Senator Jefferson considered war juvenile and the army a great mass of children playing at being soldiers. He felt that never having served in the army gave him a privileged view of the whole system, and his college training had given him an objective and keen insight into the military mind.

Early in his political career, he had scoffed at the insane wars men waged against each other. Having once decided to enter politics, Senator Jefferson had felt that his white rat experiments and his knowledge of the Civil War would guarantee him a place eventually on the Senate's prestigious Armed Forces committee. But after he had gotten to be a senator, he was repeatedly passed over for the job and finally ended up the head of an obscure committee dealing with disposal and maintenance of public lands. Senator Jefferson quite frankly had told his fellow senators that he didn't give a hoot about public lands, but they had said his very lack of prejudice, his disinterestedness, would qualify him. He had angrily argued that he would be much more qualified to direct the affairs of the armed forces, who were composed of children playing irresponsibly at being soldiers. He had argued that he could bring order to the whole system and
convince the generals that their games were really only patterned exercises in response to juvenile neglect that led quite naturally to a craving for orderly, disciplined violence. Senator Jefferson had insisted he could weed out the wars and commit us only to worthy ones. He had yelled and stomped his feet and quoted his white rats, but his fellow senators had only looked embarrassed and had given him some papers to sign, annexing river-fed lands in eastern Alaska to the public domain. Senator Jefferson had put away his Civil War scrapbook, clenched his teeth, and signed the paper. In his heart, he had cursed the senators and their damned precious army.

Senator Jefferson's disappointment had developed into a manic hatred for the military, who insisted on playing their games without him. His hatred had settled into a deep obsessive desire to catch the military unawares and disassemble it before the very eyes of the bully generals who had undoubtedly used their congressional influence to shut him out.

"I will see the military complex dissected and rotting," he often told his wife.

"I'm sure you will, dear," she would reply, rocking and knitting. "Now, why don't you come and let me hold this sweater up and see how much more it needs."

Standing by her chair, behind the unfinished ski sweater, Senator Jefferson would pound his fist into his
palm and curse. "I will see every last general stripped naked in the harsh light of truth."

"Oh, don't be silly," his wife would laugh, imagining row upon row of naked soldiers squinting into a big spotlight. "Oh, Wayland," she would chuckle affectionately, "you and your jokes."

But it was no joke to Senator Jefferson. He lived his obsession to "get" the army. He often awoke at night in a fever, dreaming of flying a jet bomber over army posts and dropping tons of streaking, flaming napalm on the selfish children who ran wildly in uniforms at his mercy. Senator Jefferson found, as time and frustration ran on, that he couldn't distinguish generals from colonels, or colonels from privates. They were all in it together, playing selfishly in a fenced and guarded playground, while he stood weeping, his nose to the fence. So he dreamed of napalming them all and went on waiting for his chance.

While he waited, Senator Jefferson tried endlessly to get on special investigating committees, but each time he mentioned his white rats or his scrapbook, his fellow senators grew embarrassed and gave him more papers to sign. He knew it was the generals who were behind it all, and in his growing frustration, he imagined lines and lines of smartly-dressed officers and privates standing behind the generals, nodding in agreement. It was a conspiracy, but he knew he could win. So he waited.
And finally the break came. From his home-town newspaper came word of a massacre -- a whole friendly Vietnamese village wiped out by the army. In his wild excitement, Senator Jefferson had hauled the young reporter to the senate floor, where the boy had vomited and cried and told a tale of grisly horror, of bodies burned black and of women and children legless and torn apart.

The tremor that had run through the Senate had brought Senator Jefferson to the height of his eloquent fury. He had raved, and his fellow senators had looked at each other and nodded dumbly. He had spoken of white rats, and they had leaned forward to listen. He appointed himself a committee of one to investigate, and there had been awed silence. He had stalked out of the Senate, dragging the weeping, stinking reporter, and the senators had buzzed like scared bees.

Senator Jefferson had had his hour -- now he would have his day. He took his crusade to Viet Nam.

A week had passed. Senator Jefferson was growing more frustrated by the minute. None of the men in division headquarters knew of an operation at Rong Song, much less a massacre. General Rush still insisted he knew nothing of any operation involving innocent civilians, as he considered the term "innocent civilian" a contradiction in time of war. He would not admit, either, to an operation involving Rong Song. He had been so disgusted with the whole affair, he had washed
his hands of it by personally burning any and all maps and reports from the operation. He wanted no credit for the ridiculous operation.

Senator Jefferson paced the floor. All evidence of an operation at Rong Song was gone. Just a shred of evidence, perhaps a message or note from a high-ranking officer, and he would have them all against the wall. But there were no officers at all in headquarters, except General Rush. Major Hartley had deserted, Major Virelli had been arrested, and the rest of the staff had all disappeared mysteriously about the time of the alleged operation and massacre. Senator Jefferson felt his case falling apart. He thought he could hear, from across the oceans, the laughter of his fellow senators. Only his pride and his hatred for the military kept him from vanishing as surely as the evidence had.

The whole thing bewildered Senator Jefferson. How could an operation, a whole massacre, disappear from the records? The young reporter, in a state of prolonged shock, had remembered only the names of the village and the division. Had he been wrong? Had he made it all up? Were the nightmares the boy swore he was having, the awful images locked up in his brain -- were they all figments of his imagination? Was it a grab for publicity? Senator Jefferson knew this was his only chance -- if he failed now to pin the massacre on the military, no one would ever listen to him again, and he would be stuck in the realm of public lands forever. His
colleagues would chuckle at his senility and think him as
crazy as his reporter, who had vomited all over himself and
the senate floor. He couldn't go out like that, Senator
Jefferson decided. He wouldn't let them beat him! There
had been a massacre, and he would prove it! He would win!

Senator Jefferson sat down, exhausted from worrying.
He dozed off and dreamed of flying over a large army post.
Scores of uniformed boys flocked out with M-16's and took
potshots at him. His napalm wouldn't release. A bullet cut
through the cockpit. Suddenly, one tore into a napalm con-
tainer. The whole plane burst into a great, consuming fire-
ball, and Senator Jefferson felt himself explode onto the
air. He saw himself falling in hot ashes to the ground, to
be swept away by his wife, who chuckled affectionately, "Oh,
Wayland, you and your jokes."

Major Pearson and the rest of General Rush's staff had
gotten within ten yards of the dike when a voice called out,
"Halt! Throw your weapons at your feet and put your hands
over your heads!"

Major Pearson frowned. "We're Americans, goddamnit!"
The voice came over the dike again after a moment, this
time followed by several rifle barrels. "Put 'em down, or
you'll get your asses blowed off."

Captain Renfro immediately threw down the AK-47 he
had been carrying. The others followed suit, with Major
Pearson grumbling about near-sighted sonsofbitches.

Slowly, a head peeked over the dike. Several more followed. PFC Caldwell was the first to emerge fully. He stood up and grinned at the mud-caked men.

"Wal, wal, looka there, Ferg. We done caught some VC's."

PFC Ferguson grinned and stood up. The rest of the squad got up, too, holding their M-16's on the officers.

Major Pearson was furious. He felt foolish standing in the paddy water holding up his arms. "Can't you idiots see we're American officers?"

PFC Caldwell looked carefully at the muddy men. He shook his head slowly. "Look more like American mudturtles to me." He grinned. "Or maybe Viet Cong mudturtles." He grinned at PFC Ferguson. "Right, Ferg? VC mudturtles?"

PFC Ferguson grinned broadly.

"We happen to be General Rush's staff," Major Pearson declared, hating the general as he said it.

"And them's your rifles, I guess," said PFC Caldwell, pointing at the rifles on the ground.

"Of course they are," Major Pearson said impatiently.

PFC Caldwell walked over to Captain Renfro and picked up the AK-47 at the captain's feet. "Then how come this here one is a VC weapon?"

Major Pearson looked at the rifle, then at Captain Renfro. "Oh, Jesus," he muttered disgustedly.
"I reckon you're all VC's, and you swiped these M-16's from dead Americans. What do you think of that?" PFC Caldwell said firmly.

Major Pearson fumed. "Then how can we speak English so well?"

PFC Caldwell chuckled. "You're the only one I heard talk so far. I reckon you're the leader. Prob'ly learned English at some gook school." He turned to Captain Renfro. "Let's hear you talk, hot dog."

Captain Renfro swallowed hard.

"Well, go on, Renfro," Major Pearson urged angrily, "say something."

"Renfro," PFC Caldwell sneered, "a goddamn gook name if I ever heard one."

"Uh . . . uh . . . ," Captain Renfro began, petrified with fear.

"Oh, Good Lord," Major Pearson muttered.

"Say, now that was some fine talk, Renfro," PFC Caldwell grinned. "Uh . . . uh . . . hee, hee, hee!"

"What's going on here?" Captain Adams demanded, walking up behind PFC Caldwell.

"We got us some gooks, Cap'n."

Captain Adams peered closely at the grimy men. "They don't look Vietnamese," he said finally. "Do they speak English?"
"Of course we speak English, you idiot," Major Pearson replied disgustedly.

"That one does -- real sassy," PFC Caldwell put in. He pointed then to Captain Renfro. "But that one over yonder come strollin' up here with a AK, and he don't say nothin' but uh, uh, uh."

Captain Adams looked at the Red Chinese AK-47. He glared at Major Pearson, who had insulted him, and back at the enemy rifle. "All right," he said, "tie their hands. Somebody call a chopper. We'll send 'em back for interrogation."

"Aw, hell, Cap'n," PFC Caldwell pleaded disappointedly, "why doncha let me and Ferg talk to 'em?"

Captain Adams ignored the question and continued glaring at Major Pearson. "Where did you learn English?" he asked coldly.

"Iowa State," Major Pearson replied as coldly. Captain Adams turned away, red-faced and insulted. Major Pearson grimaced as his hands were tightly tied behind him. He heard suddenly a laugh from PFC Caldwell.

"Looka there, Ferg. Look what this dumb one done." He pointed toward Captain Renfro, who stood paralyzed and trembling, his eyes closed. Major Pearson saw the wide, wet circle that dampened the dry mud on the front of Captain Renfro's pants. The men in the squad all gathered around to point and laugh.

"Jesus Christ, Renfro," Major Pearson muttered.
As the men began dispersing, still chuckling, Captain Renfro edged up beside Major Pearson, who looked away. Looking at the major with hurt eyes, he whispered apologetically, "Well, you wouldn't stop to let me go."

Major Pearson closed his eyes and listened to the infantrymen chuckling. "Oh, shut up, Renfro," he said without conviction.

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher lay awake listening to the moans from the man next to him.

"Oh God," Private Bing groaned, delirious, his shattered foot throbbing relentlessly. "Oh my dear God!"

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher wanted to answer the man but felt that would be presumptuous, even for a chaplain. But he still was tempted. The poor man had been moaning for a week. Somehow, he had gotten put into the officers' ward, and none of the doctors would believe that such a thing had happened. They refused to treat him, as he wasn't in the bed supposedly assigned him. In fact, they were considering listing him AWOL for not being in his proper place at the proper time. And although Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher had tried to tell the doctors that the man needed help, they had checked their charts and, finding no one assigned to that bed, had gone on about their duties, completely ignoring the heaving, groaning body on the bed.
Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher looked to the other side of his bed. Lieutenant St. James sat on the floor asleep, slumped against the bed. He had sat there day and night since the doctors had declared him a faker and found him healthy. Whatever wounds he hadn't had, the doctors had missed and had frowned and sent him on his way. He had immediately taken up a vigil beside the chaplain's bed, praying and asking forgiveness for getting the chaplain wounded. Everything Lieutenant St. James had to live for rode now on the chaplain's recovery — his death would magnify Lieutenant St. James's guilt by the number of radio operators he had gotten mangled or killed. The chaplain was his last hope for salvation.

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher patted the lieutenant tenderly on the head. Poor fellow, he thought, sitting for a week on the bare floor. Only a couple of hours a day did Lieutenant St. James have a chair. From two 'til four in the afternoon, during regular visiting hours, the doctors allowed a chair brought in, but it was taken away as soon as visiting hours ended, and Lieutenant St. James would sadly take his seat again on the floor, muttering prayers and sobbing. Sometimes he prayed and sobbed on the floor right through visiting hours and never even noticed the chair being brought in and taken away.

"Oh, Jesus! Oh God!"

The chaplain jumped a little. He looked again at the man in the bed next to him. He had learned from a short
plump donut-dolly that the man's name was Bing. He had told her when she was trying to get him to eat a donut, but he had passed out before he had eaten the donut, so the donut-dolly hadn't offered him any more and thus hadn't learned any more about him. The only other thing she had found out was that he had been wounded at Rong Song. Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher had been pleased, in a way, to find this out, because it established a kinship between the man and himself -- they both had fallen the same day.

"Oh my God oh my God oh Jesus God!"

Tears welled up in the chaplain's eyes as he saw the sticky stain that spread continually around the man's left foot. He turned his head quickly. The man would be dead in a few days if he didn't get help. Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher felt the terrible guilt of inaction burning inside him. He knew he was guilty of a most horrible sin of omission. He couldn't, as a man of God, lie in his bed and let a man die beside him.

"Oh God God God God Goddamn!"

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher winced at the poor man's feverish blasphemy. He thought of God, who had seen him through the ordeal of his own wound. How could He let this tortured soldier with the ruined foot die now when He had saved one of His own in the very next bed? Of course, Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher knew that God helped those who helped themselves, but the private in the next bed was
delirious — could he be expected to help himself? Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher had prayed like a saint to be saved for God's work here on earth — but Private Bing was out of his mind and unable to pray. The chaplain thought also of Lieutenant St. James, whose feverish, sincere prayers must have helped a great deal. He made up his mind to follow the lieutenant's holy example and give of himself to help Private Bing.

But would prayers be enough?

As much as the chaplain truly believed in the sacred power of prayer, he couldn't help thinking that medicine and the doctors had had at least a little to do with his recovery. For Private Bing to have a chance, he must have at least a minimum of medical attention. Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher, in his soul's darker moments, when Bing cried out for death, couldn't shake the scary suspicion that even God was not eager to lay a healing hand on the gangrenous. And Private Bing was fast approaching the point of no return, when his foot would rot and poison his body beyond the reach of contemporary religion.

God helps those who help themselves, the chaplain knew, but Private Bing couldn't help himself, so it stood to reason he hadn't a ghost of a chance of getting any favors from God. So Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher, deciding to take up the gauntlet where God had dropped it, vowed to help.

But how?
On one side, the ghastly moans of Private Bing swirled around the chaplain. From the other floated the half-muttered prayers of Lieutenant St. James. In the middle of these clashing utterances from delirious souls, between the madness of Bing's blasphemy and the desperation of the lieutenant's supplication, the chaplain lay thinking, wondering, praying, feeling like a saint on the brink of martyrdom, like Jesus waiting strangely for the great secret of his birth to be thrust on him. What he could do, he didn't know, but the chaplain knew he had been called.

"Oh God, my God!" came the cries from Bing's bed.

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher bit his lip and forced himself to be humble and not answer.

In his office, Major Spenser, the surgeon, glared at his wall. He was so frustrated he couldn't see straight. The calendar on the wall, in fact, looked blurred. He had missed it with every scalpel he had thrown. He banged his hand on his desk and bit his lip. It wasn't fair. Somewhere in the hospital was a man whose foot should, by all rights, belong to the chief surgeon. But no one could find the man!

Major Spenser wished he had his hands on the short, fat little blonde girl. She had probably made it all up. He held his favorite saw in his hand. It made his hand itch for action. Major Spenser's nose twitched, his nostrils flared -- he could smell clotting blood. Even the practice
log wouldn't help now, when Major Spenser knew there was a real leg throbbing sensually somewhere in the hospital, pounding his name with its dying pulse. And he would find it, he must find it. By God, he would find it!

Major Spenser drew back his arm and hurled the sharp-pointed saw. It struck the calendar and stuck in the fourteenth. Tomorrow, he thought ecstatically. Tomorrow would be the day!

Some days in Viet Nam lie quiet and fragrant across the scarred land like memories of an innocent time. The natives chatter and laugh, laundry girls and soldiers grinning and laughing in tribal remembrance of happier times. Enough lush vegetation has survived the war in places that it threatens on one of these rare days to take over the country again, to swallow the tired people in a rush of wild perfume. And the people, giddy and glad from breathing the perfume, yearn to be sweetly swallowed into the past.

Senator Wayland Mathew Jefferson heard the insane giggling of the housegirls as they cleaned boots outside his little hooch. The sickly-sweet fog of air that filled the day made him want to vomit. He threw his last clean pair of socks into his suitcase. He wanted to cry as he thought of the storm of laughter awaiting him back in the senate. Grown men, he could picture, with graying temples, all laughing like the giggly housegirls. He would simply have
to resign. Oh Lord, he prayed, show me a hobby to take me through the empty years ahead.

He was going home.

Senator Wayland Mathew Jefferson knew when he was beaten. He was going home, defeated, beaten by the army, by a bunch of neurotic liars.

Rong Song.

Was there ever such an operation? How could he know? And why would the reporter lie? How could he have cried and thrown up, thrown out his guts, on the senate floor if something hadn't scared him almost to death?

Senator Jefferson slammed the suitcase and picked it up. It felt heavy, like his soul. He left the room sadly, leaving, he felt, his pride, dusty and stale, under the smelly little cot that was soaked with anxious sweat and hopeless tears. He hated the army, as one hates an invulnerable bully.

Senator Jefferson heard through the window the giggles of the housegirls, as they talked to the grinning soldiers. He paused a moment to wipe his eyes and compose his face before going outside.

General Rush could feel the perfume blowing into his office, cooled by the air conditioner. Room temperature perfume, he thought vaguely, straight from the jungles of Viet Nam. The thought did little for him, one way or the other. He looked again at the note on his desk. It, at
least, did something for him. It broke him up. General Rush read the note again and roared with laughter and pounded on his desk.

"Goddamned idiot," he said at last, chuckling a little. "Goddamned idiot," he said again, shaking his head and smiling. Then his face tightened. The smile fell back into place, the corners curving down around his chin. "Goddamned idiot," he said angrily. He tossed the paper on the floor and stood up. He walked over and stomped on the note.

"Hartley!" he yelled.

Fat Robertson poked his head in the door. "Major Hartley's not here, sir. He's still gone."

General Rush frowned even deeper. "Well, you tell those ignorant bastards at Awards and Decorations not to send me any more notes. Majeskie didn't do a goddamned thing at Rong Song or any other goddamned place to deserve a medal."

Fat Robertson looked puzzled. General Rush continued.

"You tell the bastards if Majeskie gets anything, it'll be a goddamned court-martial." He thought angrily of Colonel Majeskie losing the helicopter. "Now get your ass out of here," he snarled, and Fat Robertson retreated quickly, leaving only his pen that General Rush looked at briefly before tossing it on the floor. He grunted and walked out of his office.

"Hartley!" he yelled as he stalked down the hall.

"Hartley! You bastard!"
Fat Robertson stuck his head out a door. "Sir, he's
...
"Oh, shut up," General Rush muttered. He realized that
he got no enjoyment out of yelling at enlisted men. He missed
Hartley.

Senator Jefferson paused outside General Rush's door.
It was open. He could see through Major Hartley's tiny
outer office into General Rush's private office. Unable to
resist a look, he peered through the door. He could see the
general's great wide polished desk and plush chair. He
stepped into the outer office.

Nervously, like a schoolboy in the empty principal's
office after school hours, he stood and fingered his ears
and nose and glanced around guiltily. His hands sweated.
A few steps, and he would be alone inside The Office. He
walked like a zombie, slowly, across the room and stopped
at General Rush's door. He looked in.

The huge desk seemed wide as the whole broad hood of
the Military Machine. And behind it was the plush upholstered
driver's seat -- empty. Flashes of boyhood dreams wracked
his mind. Lines of blue and gray filed by proudly as he
gazed at the desk. The chair beckoned irresistibly.

With a sudden rush, Senator Jefferson was around the
desk and into the chair. At first, he was petrified. He
panted and tried to hold his breath to listen for footsteps.
He felt as if he would be discovered at any second.

As the seconds ticked into minutes, Senator Jefferson relaxed. He looked around him. On the desk was a strange assortment of ballpoint pens engraved with a variety of initials. He pulled open a desk drawer. Dozens of wristwatches ticked at him furiously, as if angry at being disturbed. Senator Jefferson closed the drawer and leaned back. He folded his hands behind his head and gazed around the room.

He liked this office. He felt as if it were his own, and always had been. It fit him. The walls closed in just snugly enough; the chair held his shoulders perfectly; the desk boldly, yet humbly, accepted and supported his feet. He listened to the air conditioner humming to him and sniffed the fragrant perfumed air that blew softly in for his approval.

A fine office, he thought. How it could have loved him! It was the elegantly cozy sort of office that could show affection for the right man. Senator Jefferson found himself gazing around possessively at the floor. The infantry-blue carpeting was immaculate, except for a piece of paper and a ball-point pen that lay defiantly and vulgarly beside the desk.

Senator Jefferson was offended by the litter. He pushed back his chair and picked up the pen and paper. He sat back down and put the paper on the desk. He started to put the pen down, too, but decided suddenly that generals should
read their memos with pen in hand. He shifted his glasses and cleared his throat, holding the paper in one hand, the pen jauntily raised in the other.

"General Rush," he read and cleared his throat again, "do you give your authorization for a Medal of Honor to be awarded one of your senior officers for actions in or about June 7, at Rong Song . . . ."

Senator Jefferson's mouth suddenly went dry. He felt sweat break out on his palms. He held the note in his trembling, sweaty hand and read on, silently and deliberately mouthing the words. As he reached the end, the desk and chair fell away beneath him, and he was on his feet, charging through the door, still gripping the note and the pen. He shook his head as he hurried out the door, babbling happily and incoherently.

He was met at the outer door by Fat Robertson, who seemed to be looking for something. "Hey," Fat Robertson asked, "is General . . . ? There it is!" He grabbed his pen away from Senator Jefferson, who passed him quickly and skipped down the hall. "Jeez," Fat Robertson frowned, looking at his pen, "you got it all sweaty."

Senator Jefferson felt, as he skipped down the hall, like a mountie getting his man. He laughed with the giggling Vietnamese housegirls outside and whistled as he walked into the warm sunlight.
Fat Robertson watched through the window. He looked down at his pen and made an ugly face. "Jeez," he said disgustedly and wiped the pen on his pants.

Specialist Fourth Class Mike Johnson sat sadly behind the Fire Direction Center and watched the brown water of the drainage ditch slide muddily by. His socks and boots lay beside him, fairly ripening in the hot sun. Almost a month had passed since he had sneaked out to the edge of the ditch every night for a week to dangle his feet in the filthy water. His feet were now no better. Scales had formed and flaked away, formed and flaked away, again and again. He looked at his feet. In the morning sun, they glowed rosy against the hairy brownness of his calves. And they itched like crazy. He had scratched them almost raw and still had to wear rubber shower thongs instead of boots. Therein lay the problem.

"Where are your boots?" Captain Watson had asked a week ago.

"Under my bunk," Spec Four Johnson had replied nervously. He remembered the hospital and the crazed doctor whose joyful passion was amputation. He didn't want to go back there. "But I was just going in to put them on, sir."

Captain Watson had looked at the red, scaly feet.

"We sent you to the hospital to get rid of all that. Why is it you still have those damned sick feet?"
Spec Four Johnson had had to admit it was a stroke of luck that he still had the feet. "The grace of God, I guess, sir."

"You're going back to the hospital, Johnson." Captain Watson remembered the vision of the cold-eyed CID investigators asking him brutally why Johnson had been blown away by a mortar round while lying in his bunk, when he should have been in the hospital. "Yes," he had said again with conviction, "You'll have to go back. They'll get rid of those sick feet in a hurry."

Spec Four Johnson knew very well how quickly they would get rid of his feet. "Sir," he had said desperately, "actually, I was just going to put on my boots right now." He had saluted sharply and left to go put his boots on.

Captain Watson had frowned as he watched the lying sonofabitch leaving. He had stood thinking of a rubber hose across the bridge of his nose and of the CID men chuckling at his agony. "We'll see, Johnson," he had muttered, "we'll see." He had gone into his office, Spec Four Johnson learned later, to call the battalion doctor.

So Spec Four Johnson was worried. He had only a month to go before he would rotate home. He could imagine the horror of having his feet taken off a month before going home -- and for a case of fungus. He scratched his feet. God, how they itched! Especially since he had started wearing the boots. He had worn them all night and all day
the past few days for fear that a mortar attack might find him barefoot in the bunker with Captain Watson. The trouble was that they made his feet itch so badly that he had jumped out of his bunk three times the night before to run outside -- the itch was maddening. And each time he had run out, he had been followed by every other man in the barracks. They had never seen Johnson run during a mortar attack, so they assumed fearfully that something much worse was afoot -- a full-scale invasion, perhaps. Trampling one another mercilessly, the men had three times scrambled to the big bunker about fifty yards from the barracks. And each time, they had awakened Captain Watson, who each time had sleepily stumbled barefoot from his bunk at the cries of "Incoming" and had stood embarrassed in his shorts in the big bunker until the danger had passed. Spec Four Johnson, hearing the cries of the men and remembering well Captain Watson's displeasure at his sleeping through mortar attacks, and remembering well the crazed surgeon at the hospital, had run along with them as they sped by him. Each time, in the big bunker, he had stood close to Captain Watson and had stepped carefully on the captain's bare toes to show that he was dutifully wearing his boots. Spec Four Johnson did not want to go back to the hospital.

"I guess I won't have to go back to the hospital, sir," he had said each time, lighting a match so Captain Watson would know whose booted foot had stamped on his toes.
Stumping and hopping on one foot, Captain Watson had cursed violently each time and assured Spec Four Johnson that he would be in a psycho ward by morning, goddamnit.

So Spec Four Johnson was worried. Nothing he did, either wearing his boots or not wearing them, pleased the captain. He looked again at his feet. Their rosy pinkness made them look almost pretty against the brown muddy backdrop of water, like orchids too precious to be plucked.

"Ah ha! Ah ha! Ah ha!" Captain Watson came suddenly around the corner of the FDC. "No boots again, Johnson?" He turned to the man with him, a young trim captain wearing Medical Corps insignias. "Take him away, Doc."

Spec Four Johnson stuttered as he tried hastily to explain that he was only drying his boots, as they had gotten wet.

"Been soaking your feet in the ditch, Johnson?" Captain Watson smiled. "It won't work. Those boots aren't wet," he said confidently, feeling the boots.

"Th - they're d-d-dry now, sir."

Captain Watson ignored him. "Look at those feet, doc. Look how pink they are," he said, pointing at the pink feet.

The doctor leaned close to look.

Spec Four Johnson remembered the surgeon looking at them in much the same way at the hospital. He groaned and thought quickly. "I-I just washed them, sir. They're clean. That's why they're pink. Yours would be pink, too, if you washed them."
The doctor straightened up indignantly.
"I wash my feet, soldier."
"Well, yes sir, I ... I'm sure you do ... ."
"He washes his feet, Johnson," Captain Watson chimed in. "You'd better watch how you talk to an officer."
"Yes sir," Johnson moaned pitifully, holding his feet possessively in both hands.

The doctor thought a minute or so. "Do they hurt?" he asked.

"Oh, no," Johnson answered hurriedly. "Oh, no sir, they don't hurt a bit." He pinched his foot hard to show that it didn't hurt. The pain made him want to cry.

The young Medical Corps captain watched, his brow furrowed in medical thought. "Mind if I do that?" he asked.

Spec Four Johnson shook his head eagerly. The doctor's pinch made him bite his lip hard. Jesus Christ in heaven, he thought, as he watched the doctor pinching and poking at the raw red flesh. His eyes were wet, and the doctor blurred.

The doctor straightened up again. "Hmmm."

Captain Watson watched him anxiously. "Well?" he asked finally. "Does he go? Does he?"

The doctor looked again at Spec Four Johnson, still sitting on the ground, tears washing his eyes as the pain lingered on. "Yes," he said, "I'm afraid this young man is in bad shape."
Captain Watson clapped his hands and grinned. "On your feet, Johnson. Get your bags packed."

After some protesting, Spec Four Johnson walked sadly toward his barracks, tears standing fuzzily in his eyes. He walked slowly, deliberately trying to memorize the sensation of having feet.

Captain Watson watched him go, then turned to the doctor. "Pretty bad, huh?" he smiled.

The doctor gravely shook his head. "I'm afraid so. That pinching test proved it." He paused ominously. "The feet were numb. The pinching should have provoked extreme pain, but the poor man didn't even move." He shook his head again. "The blood wasn't getting to the feet. That's why they were numb. I just hope there's time to get him to the hospital before it's too late." He clucked and shook his head and left.

Captain Watson grinned and, doing a little dance, followed.

Senator Jefferson waved the note furiously at General Rush. "Do you mean to sit there and tell me that you know nothing about this operation? When I have plain evidence right here in my hand that one of your colonels has been recommended for a medal for the operation? Do you?"

General Rush watched the senator's small, sharp eyes glowing like hot coals. "Majeskie hasn't been recommended
for shit," he said.

Senator Jefferson waved the note like a banner. "You know nothing about the operation?" he demanded.

General Rush yawned. He had no idea where the sonofabitch had gotten the note -- probably from one of Virelli's VC Intelligence men -- but he refused to acknowledge any insinuation that he had had any part whatsoever in a ridiculous operation in which his whole staff had surrendered and his damned commanding colonel had wrecked his helicopter. General Rush wanted no part of it.

"Do you deny that you knew about the operation, General?" Senator Jefferson screamed, the veins popping out like blue snakes on his scrawny neck, looking like snakes climbing a fence post, General Rush mused, remembering his boyhood in Nebraska.

"I was out of town," he said.

Senator Jefferson stood still, panting and puffing.

"We will get you, General. If you had any part in this, if any of your men had any part in it -- we will get you. That I promise."

General Rush puffed his cigar and eyed the gold watch chain hanging across Senator Jefferson's stomach. "We?" he asked calmly.

Senator Jefferson stood up straight and sneered importantly. "Yes, we," he said proudly. "Myself and the Central Investigation Division. We will track down whoever is responsible." He leaned across General Rush's desk suddenly,
his hands gripping the edges, his red and sweating face an inch from the general's cigar. "And if we find, General, that you are involved . . . ." He trailed off threateningly.

General Rush glanced at the senator and then went back to looking at the watch chain, puffing casually on his cigar.

Senator Jefferson waited for a response, but getting none, drew back quickly as his nose began to get terribly hot from the cigar, and the smoke began making him want to sneeze. He stood up and rubbed his nose. "We will find the guilty party, General. Rest assured of that. In the name of innocent civilians everywhere, we will see that the monster is punished." With that, he turned and left, slamming the door.

General Rush sat fidgeting the watch on the long gold chain, dangling it momentarily in front of him like a hypnotist. But it began to make him dizzy, so he grunted and tossed it into a drawer and went on puffing his cigar. Congress, he decided, was an asylum built especially to house the misfits, the lame and the dim-witted, the dregs of society. He watched the smoke curl in rings to the ceiling and wondered what kind of senator Colonel Majeskie would make. Probably a damned good one, General Rush decided. He certainly had the brains for it.

"I bet you don't know what the 'J' stands for," Lieutenant Lawrence told the bartender at the Officers Club. "I
bet if you guess for a trillion thousand years, you couldn't
guess what the 'J' stands for." He weaved drunkenly on his
stool. The bartender ignored him and went on about his
business, wiping the drink glasses behind the bar.

Lieutenant Stillman looked angrily at Lieutenant
Lawrence. You bastard, he thought. He drank the last of
his beer and started to leave. Lieutenant Lawrence caught
his arm, almost falling off his bar stool.

"Hey, hey, old Jimmy J. Where you goin'?"
Lieutenant Stillman pulled away angrily.

"You said you wouldn't mention that. You said you
wouldn't say a word about it, you bastard." He wanted very
much at that moment to hit the sonofabitch, but he doubted
he could ever get into the field again if he did, knowing
the bastard's closeness with the battery commander.

"Aw, come on, Jimmy J.," Lieutenant Lawrence said
drunkenly, grinning and slapping Lieutenant Stillman on
the arm. "I was just havin' a little fun."

"That's not my idea of fun. How would you like it if
you had a" -- he lowered his voice and looked around -- "a
middle name you couldn't stand, and some drunk bastard told
every damned stranger he could find about it?" Lieutenant
Stillman mentally measured Lieutenant Lawrence's grin and
estimated it to be about the width of four clenched knuckles.
His hand itched. He rubbed his knuckles on his pantleg.
"Come on," Lieutenant Lawrence said cheerily, slurring even on his one-syllable words. "I'll buy you a beer."

Lieutenant Stillman looked disgustedly at the weaving lieutenant. Then he signed and sat down. Hell, if he walked out on the bastard now, it wouldn't be a minute before he'd told the whole Officers Club about the middle name. He wished to hell he'd never told Lieutenant Lawrence. But it was a heavy burden to bear alone, and he'd gotten a little drunk tonight, and . . . well, it was done. Maybe the bastard would pass out.

Lieutenant Stillman sipped his beer miserably and decided that when he got home, he would have his name changed. Only a few nights before, in the club, he had been doing well with a WAC lieutenant until he had asked her name. It was Joyce, she had said. Lieutenant Stillman had turned pale and excused himself. He had sat in the john and cursed his father, waiting for closing time. Wild, horrible thoughts had run through his mind until he had gone to sleep on the toilet and dreamed of getting married to a girl named Joyce James. "James Joyce . . . hee hee . . . and hee hee . . . Joyce James . . . I pronounce you . . . hee hee . . . ."
The preacher had been unable to finish, and Lieutenant Stillman had awakened yelling on the floor of the john. He was escorted back to the battery by a friendly captain and had passed out again while trying to write his father a poison pen letter.
If only he could get Captain Watson to send him to the field, if only he could go out on operation and occupy his mind calling in artillery, Lieutenant Stillman felt sure he could forget, at least for a while, the awful plague of having a girl's middle name. Directing the artillery on Rong Song from the FDC had helped a little, but it wasn't like actually being there. He buried his nose in his beer glass and felt like crying. He noticed the WAC he had deserted coming in the door. Embarrassed, frustrated and generally miserable, Lieutenant Stillman looked both ways trying to spot a back door. Suddenly, he felt a great jab bounce off his ribs.

"No, no, no!" Lieutenant Lawrence laughed and poked him again. "Not Jerome!"

Oh, good Lord, Lieutenant Stillman thought. The bastard's at it again.

"Jeremiah!" shouted a pudgy captain at the end of the bar.

"No, no, no!" Lieutenant Lawrence laughed. "Try again! Ten bucks says no one can guess it!"

"You're on!" shouted a burly colonel, laying ten dollars on the bar. It was covered by money from all directions, as hands reached in from everywhere to back up the colonel.

Lieutenant Stillman tried to leave. He was beginning to feel physically sick. The colonel pointed a finger at him. "Hold it there, Lieutenant, I've got ten bucks riding on this!"
The smoke and laughter and wild noises from the jukebox made Lieutenant Stillman's head swirl. He felt like vomiting. He saw the WAC looking at him in a puzzled way and tried to hold it in.

"Three guesses!" Lieutenant Lawrence chirped happily.

The colonel became serious, swaying a little from too many whiskey sours. "Three guesses," he agreed. He furrowed his brow and prepared to guess. Catcalls and yells of encouragement resounded.

Lieutenant Stillman's stomach was churning from too much beer and smoke and stale air. He felt too sick to even want to punch Lieutenant Lawrence anymore.

The colonel thought heavily a moment, then his eyes lit up.

"Jesus," he said triumphantly.

Catcalls and jeers rose up as Lieutenant Lawrence shook his head happily.

Jesus, thought Lieutenant Stillman, feeling the warm beer rising in his throat. He gulped and tried not to look at the WAC.

"Jonathan!" the colonel exclaimed, getting angry and embarrassed, wishing a little that he hadn’t made the bet. Lieutenant Lawrence shook his head. Lieutenant Stillman held his stomach, wanting to run to the toilet.

Sweat poured off the colonel's face. He was nervous. Not only his money, but his image and reputation, lay on
the line now. Suddenly he turned to Lieutenant Stillman. "Lieutenant, I order you to tell me your middle name!"

Hisses and boos filled the air, cries of "cheat!" and "foul!" Then the room hushed.

Lieutenant Stillman stood gazing glassy-eyed at the sweating colonel, whose contorted face became a blur.

"J-J-" Lieutenant Stillman began, no longer caring. The heat and the smoke nauseated him more and more. He was past humiliation — the name no longer mattered. He found it hard to speak around the great glob of something that rose in his throat like mercury in a thermometer. "J-J-"

The colonel leaned forward. Everyone in the club listened anxiously. "Out with it, man!" the colonel shouted. "Out with it!"

Suddenly Lieutenant Stillman's mouth flew open, and a thick rain of food and beer and bile spewed all over the colonel, the bar, the money, and Lieutenant Lawrence.

Laughter rocked the Officers Club. The colonel looked once at the money and left. Lieutenant Lawrence tried to pick out the dry bills, but they were all slick and slimy. The drunken officers howled and pounded each other, pointing at Lieutenant Lawrence and the money.

"It can't be all that bad."

Lieutenant Stillman, bent over just outside the club door, looked up at the WAC. He couldn't answer — his
stomach kept heaving.

"Let me help you," she said and helped him to a bench.
"I know how it is," she said after they had both sat down.

Lieutenant Stillman looked at her. No, she didn't know how it was; she couldn't possibly know. He shook his head, and it hurt so badly that he shook it again to take his mind off his tormented stomach. But nothing could take his mind off the name. He felt like crying. It was no use. Even the artillery was only a temporary thing. He had a whole life to live and only another year or so of the army. Tears filled his eyes.

"That was a terrible thing they did in there," the WAC said quietly. She looked at him with sympathetic eyes. "I know how it is."

Lieutenant Stillman glared at her. "Like hell you do! How could you know?"

"It's your middle name, isn't it? That's the whole problem, isn't it?" she asked softly.

Lieutenant Stillman looked away.

The WAC put her hand on his. "Do you know what my name is?"

"I ought to," Lieutenant Stillman muttered. Of course he remembered her name. And it couldn't have been a worse one . . . for a man. "Your name's Joyce, goddamnit. Why don't we shake on it?" He held out his hand bitterly.

"Joyce . . . meet Joyce." He waited for her reaction.
"I knew your name," she said quietly. "I looked it up in the records." She paused. "But you don't know mine."

Lieutenant Stillman looked at her. Just how the hell far did she want to carry all this? "No," he said coldly. "What is it?"

The girl smiled and looked down.

"Raymond."

"Raymond?" Lieutenant Stillman looked up.

The girl nodded her head. Then she looked up into Lieutenant Stillman's eyes and smiled.

"Raymond?"

She nodded.

Suddenly, Lieutenant Stillman was on the ground, rolling around and laughing hysterically. The girl sat on the bench and giggled. Tears rolled from their eyes.

Lieutenant Lawrence was blushing bright red when he found Lieutenant Stillman laughing on the ground. He was furious.

"I'll get you, Stillman," he sputtered. "I'll . . . I'll talk to Morley. I'll tell him about this. I'll get you!"

Lieutenant Stillman, still laughing, looked up at Lieutenant Lawrence, who stood wet and stinking in the lights of the club. He straightened up slowly and filled Lieutenant Lawrence's mouth as full as possible with his knuckles. Lieutenant Lawrence fell to the ground, spitting and gagging.
Lieutenant Stillman shook his knuckles and laughed, feeling better than he had in a long time. He pulled the startled girl to her feet, and they walked away into the night, leaving Lieutenant Lawrence alone in the dirt, trying to explain to an M.P. why he smelled so bad and why he was lying on the ground outside the Officers Club.

Colonel Majeskie leaned back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling in his office. He watched the blades of the ceiling fan turning jerkily around and around. He smiled. "It was nothing," he pictured himself saying to the President, who proudly draped the Medal of Honor around Colonel Majeskie's neck. "Nothing, my eye," the President would grin, shaking the colonel's hand warmly.

Sergeant Hightower snapped him out of the daydream suddenly by barging through the door.

"Somebody here to see you."

Colonel Majeskie eyed the sergeant disdainfully. Damned desk jockey, he thought, leaning back farther and putting his feet on his desk.

"Who is it, Hightower? I'm busy."

"Some guy from Awards and Decorations." Sergeant Hightower started to leave. "I'll tell him you're busy."

Colonel Majeskie's feet hit the floor with a loud bang that startled both himself and Sergeant Hightower. At first, Colonel Majeskie thought the loud noise had been the sniper
shooting at him. He drew his neck into his collar. Then he noticed Sergeant Hightower staring at him, and he realized what had happened. Awards and Decoration! Colonel Majeskie hadn't expected to be personally interviewed. He gulped nervously. He supposed that was standard procedure with Medal of Honor winners. Holy smoke! He had only been counting on a Silver Star -- the Medal of Honor had been a dream. And now it was a dream come true!

"Send him in," he said to Sergeant Hightower quickly. "No. Wait!" He was getting too excited to talk. "Let . . . let me have about fifteen minutes, then send him in."

Sergeant Hightower stared disgustedly at Colonel Majeskie. The bastard really should be put on permanent latrine duty, he decided. He turned and went out.

Colonel Majeskie went quickly into his back room. Under the bed he found his prized patent-leather-toed jungle boots. They glowed like the sun, he noticed proudly. He picked out his freshest, stiffest pair of starched jungle fatigues. They made him think of the laundry girls, and he went back out into the office in his olive-drab boxer shorts to look through the window. Completely ignoring the sniper, momentarily forgetting the old man with the knife, Colonel Majeskie tried mentally to figure out the time of day when the sun would be at an angle to shine most advantageously on his medal, to carry the proud glare to the stunned laundry girls. The problem was tough. He decided to get Captain Watson's
FDC to figure it. Looking longingly out the window, Colonel Majeskie could see that the girls hadn't yet shucked their shirts, but he could easily imagine their eager young breasts jostling about as they would cluster at the ditch to gape at his medal. Perhaps he would invite them over to touch it. Colonel Majeskie groaned ecstatically at the thought: touch it. He went quickly into the back room to change his shorts.

"Like hell I'll wait!" Senator Jefferson growled indignanty.

"But there's someone before you, sir, and he's waiting, too." Sergeant Hightower patiently explained, indicating the Awards and Decorations clerk who sat looking at his hands.

"I'm a United States Senator," Senator Jefferson declared. "That means there's only one man before me." He sneered. "Now, if the President is here, I'll wait. Is that the President?" He pointed toward the clerk.

Sergeant Hightower shrugged wearily. "I don't know. Ask him."


Sergeant Hightower stood up.

"All right, all right. I'll tell the colonel you're . . . ."
"Never mind that," Senator Jefferson said, waving him back down. "I don't want to give him a chance to sneak away."

"You must know the colonel," Sergeant Hightower chuckled.

"I know his kind," the senator said, opening the office door.

Sergeant Hightower wondered vaguely where Senator Jefferson had known Colonel Majeskie. Probably on latrine duty somewhere. He shrugged and sighed and counted off the days on his calendar.

Colonel Majeskie, resplendent in clean fatigues and shiny boots, was somewhat surprised to see the Awards and Decorations man dressed as a civilian. Even Awards and Decorations was part of the army, even if they were all a bunch of desk jockeys.

"I thought you people wore uniforms," he protested.

Senator Jefferson knew immediately that he was dealing with a maniac. After a statement like that, it was not hard for Senator Jefferson to imagine the colonel joyfully murdering a whole village full of people.

"Why the hell would we wear uniforms?" He couldn't remember seeing any of the senators wearing uniforms, except the show-offs who wore them on Armistice Day to show they had served. Vulgar bastards.
Colonel Majeskie was surprised that the man refused to call him "sir." He glared. "Don't you address a colonel as 'sir'?" he asked, feeling every inch a colonel.

"Not usually," Senator Jefferson said disgustedly. "Usually, I call them all sonsofbitches."

Colonel Majeskie was more than surprised. He wondered if the man were one of the new black militants he'd heard about in the *Stars and Stripes*. Probably not, he decided, noticing that the man wasn't black. He wondered if he should chew the man out for insolence. Then he thought of his medal.

"Well," he smiled, "I guess a lot of them are." He wondered what the man's rank was, thinking seriously of having him busted after the medal was secure. "I really expected you to wear a uniform," he said hintingly.

Senator Jefferson blushed angrily. "I don't have a uniform."

Colonel Majeskie was shocked. "No uniform?" He bet the man was a militant and that he had burned his uniform. It was becoming very hard, as a Medal of Honor winner, for Colonel Majeskie to be polite to the man. "Did you ever have one?"

Senator Jefferson's face burned. He didn't appreciate having his military record questioned, especially by a murderer. He started to say something about the white rats and the Civil War scrapbook, but he decided a mass murderer
would never understand. He decided to attack. He peered closely at the colonel.

"Were you at Rong Song?"

Colonel Majeskie was still rankled by the omission of the "sir", but he let it go, feeling that at last the Awards and Decorations man was getting down to the meat of the matter. He leaned back and put his feet on his desk.

"Yep. I was there."

Senator Jefferson leaned forward, his palms sweating. "Were you in command?"

Colonel Majeskie wondered if he should mention that General Rush was over-all commander. No, he decided, the general would have to get his own medals. He smiled broadly. "All the time," he said.

"That is precisely what I wanted to hear, Colonel!" Senator Jefferson was on his feet and grinning demonically. He turned to leave.

Colonel Majeskie was dismayed. "What about my medal?" he asked anxiously. He had prepared a whole report of his exploits at Rong Song, to supplement the medal recommendation. He grabbed it out of a drawer and waved it in the air.

Senator Jefferson glowered menacingly. "I'll see you hang first, Colonel." He turned and walked to the door.

Colonel Majeskie's feet came down off the desk with a bang. The force jarred the desk-top spring, so that the steel top whanged up, throwing the twenty-page report into
the air and sending a paperweight into the back of Senator Jefferson's head.

The senator turned around quickly, rubbing his head groggily. My God! he thought. The man is a maniac, throwing paperweights at senators! He looked at the upright steel flap on the desk and then at Colonel Majeskie, who stood slack-jawed, staring in amazement. Quickly, Senator Jefferson slipped out the door and ran to find his CID men.

Colonel Majeskie sat down heavily. The room whirled. What had gone wrong? He looked at the report, scattered around on the floor — twenty pages, gone to waste. He couldn't believe it. He wouldn't! Colonel Majeskie wracked his brain. He had to get his medal! He couldn't let some middle-aged militant, uniform-burning clerk keep him from the honor he deserved. His brain teemed with a thousand thousand thoughts. Suddenly, like the voice of God, one emerged over all the rest.

Major Dyke!

Major "Bull" Dyke, the man who had led all the battalions in turn and had kept the brigade operational so long; whom Colonel Majeskie had promised a personal pension to keep leading the leaderless battalions; Major Dyke, who had run away to Saigon to open a whorehouse for chaplains! Major Dyke! If anyone in Viet Nam could get Colonel Majeskie a medal, it would be this man among men, this ambitious superman. All Colonel Majeskie's hopes swarmed around the image
of Major Dyke. He had to find him. He would go to Saigon
and find him! Before the crazy militant clerk blocked the
channels to glory forever.

Colonel Majeskie ran across the office and out the side
door. The slamming of the door behind him sounded like a
sniper round. He ducked. He looked up panicky to find the
old man sitting on the office steps, crying and holding a
knife. Colonel Majeskie gasped. His heart pounded wildly.
Dodging and weaving, he made his terrified way to his per-
sonal jeep. He jumped in and roared off, pitching great
clouds of dust all over the old Vietnamese man, who wiped
his eyes and cried and held the knife to his throat. Soldiers
walking by thought the old man was probably Colonel Majeskie's
boot-boy, resting after scraping boots all day. The crying
itself was not thought strange in anyone who worked for
Colonel Majeskie. Several men remembered seeing Sergeant
Hightower break suddenly into tears for no apparent reason,
on several occasions.

On the dusty road to Saigon, Colonel Majeskie sweated
heavily. His thoughts raced wildly ahead to finding Major
Dyke, the only man left who could save his medal. He would
offer to double Major Dyke's pension, even treble it! He
remembered hearing the sniper round, seeing the vicious old
man with the knife -- oh, the horrors! Everything seemed
against him! He supposed in his distress that such things
always happen to those who reach for glory -- danger is the
price of glory. No guts, no glory. Colonel Majeskie felt his stomach and his intestines churning nervously. The last awful sound he had heard as he had roared out of headquarters was that of the laundry girls giggling. He knew they had been laughing at him. But they wouldn't laugh long — no one laughs at a Medal of Honor.

He thought of the bare young breasts that must surely be bouncing over the hot washtubs, streaming delicious exotic sweat. The thought almost made Colonel Majeskie run another jeep off the road. The other jeep swerved to the side just in time to avoid a head-on collision and barely managed to stay on the road.

Colonel Majeskie recovered and set his course toward Saigon, toward the elusive wizard of the war, toward his savior, his Messiah — Major "Bull" Dyke. If anyone could do it, Major Dyke could. Colonel Majeskie saw the sun setting behind the distant trees. He thought of his shining medal growing dull and dropping out of sight like the sun.

He put his foot to the floor and hurried to catch it.

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside cursed the maniac who had almost run him off the road. He ordered his driver to remember the jeep's license number. He wondered why the army issued licenses to maniacs. It had looked like Colonel Majeskie's jeep. He made it a point to complain to Majeskie when he reached brigade headquarters.
Lieutenant Colonel Burnside had a long list of complaints to present to Colonel Majeskie. He went over them mentally as the jeep pulled up in front of brigade headquarters. First on the list was that he needed a helicopter. He couldn't run a battalion as ragged as the Third Brigade without one. It had irked him terribly to see Colonel Majeskie soaring above him at Rong Song. Lieutenant Colonel Burnside had his mind made up to ask for a transfer if he couldn't get a helicopter.

"Where's Colonel Majeskie?" he asked Sergeant Hightower.

Sergeant Hightower surveyed Lieutenant Colonel Burnside tiredly. He shrugged. "Damned if I know. I think he left."

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside looked into Colonel Majeskie's office. "I'll go in and wait." He walked into the office, knowing fully well that Colonel Majeskie often hid under his desk for unknown reasons. He went into the office and closed the door.

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside searched the office briefly and decided the colonel was really gone. He sat down at the desk to wait. The desk had amazed him since the first time he had seen it. He wasn't quite sure what Colonel Majeskie had had in mind when he had built the monstrosity. It looked like a safe. He reached up and pulled the top down until it snapped shut. Lieutenant Colonel Burnside had never seen anything like it. He supposed it must be some sort of catapult. He picked up the paperweight and set it on the desk.
and tried to figure out how the desk worked. After a while, he gave up and looked around the office.

The rugs, the fan -- nice. He thought briefly that it would be comfortable having an office like this, if he could get rid of the damned desk . . . and Colonel Majeskie. Why not? he thought. He could run the brigade better than Majeskie, who was a ridiculous excuse for a commander. Perhaps there was a way. He sat back to think about the possibilities.

Suddenly the door opened, and a bespectacled face stuck into the room. "Sir?" It was the Awards and Decorations clerk.

"Yes, what can I do for you?" Lieutenant Colonel Burnside asked curtly.

"I'm . . . ," the clerk came into the room. "I'm from Awards and Decorations . . . ."

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside was taken aback. "What in God's name are you doing here?"

The clerk shuffled about nervously. "It . . . it's about your medal, sir . . . ." He squinted and tried to see Lieutenant Colonel Burnside's nametag. He had thought Colonel Majeskie was a full colonel. "You . . . you are Colonel Majeskie . . . ?"

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside wasn't at all certain what was going on. "What medal?" he demanded.

The clerk fumbled for his papers and handed them to Lieutenant Colonel Burnside. "Uh . . . this one, sir . . ."
the one you . . . uh . . . you made out for . . . uh . . . for yourself . . . ."

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside looked incredulously at the papers. He couldn't believe what he read: " . . . exceptional valor . . . outstanding heroism . . . ." He looked up, shaking his head. He couldn't believe the gall of the sonofabitch. A medal! For wrecking helicopters? For dropping asinine leaflets on people who couldn't read English? Lieutenant Colonel Burnside shook his head. The gall of the sonofabitch! He should get a medal for gall!

"The sonofabitch should get a medal for gall!"

The clerk was startled. "Sir?"

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside shook his head and looked at the paper. "Bullshit," he muttered, "bullshit."

"Is . . . is there anything wrong, sir?"

"Who wrote this bullshit?"

The clerk was getting confused. "Why, you did, sir . . . ." He recalled vividly the awful scene at Awards and Decorations when Captain Rowley had discovered Colonel Majeskie's own signature at the bottom of his recommendation for the medal. "Go find out what that pompous bastard is up to, Jenkins," he had ordered the clerk, who cowered now, biting his fingernails, feeling hopeless, caught between the two furious officers. He closed his eyes a moment.

"Don't go to sleep on me, goddamnit!" Lieutenant Colonel Burnside yelled, enraged at the ridiculous affair. "What
the hell do you mean I wrote this bullshit?"

"Well, sir, we just assumed, since your . . . ."

"Assumed?" Lieutenant Colonel Burnside exploded. "Assumed?"

The clerk was about to explain that Colonel Majeskie's signature at the bottom of the recommendation had made it look like he had written it when the door suddenly banged open.

"Freeze!"

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside looked up to see two CID agents standing in the doorway. "What the hell is this, breaking into my office?" he demanded angrily, forgetting in his anger that it wasn't his office.

"He's the one, Harv," the taller agent said. "Read him his rights."

The shorter man began rapidly and eagerly reciting Article 3^ of the Uniform Code of Military Justice. "You have the right . . . ."

"What is this?" Lieutenant Colonel Burnside asked abruptly. "Get your asses out of my office!" He pointed toward the door, forgetting again whose office he was in.

"You're Colonel Majeskie, and we're here to arrest you for the murder of an unspecified number of . . . .", the tall agent began.

"You have the right to . . . .", the short agent began again.
"Bullshit!" Lieutenant Colonel Burnside snorted. "I'm not Majeskie!"

"But, sir," the clerk interrupted, squinting myopically at the medal recommendation, "here's your signature." He pointed at Colonel Majeskie's signature scrawled across the bottom.

The tall agent looked at the papers while Lieutenant Colonel Burnside yelled "Bullshit!" and the shorter agent began telling the fuming colonel his rights, "You have . . . . ."

"Yep, that's it," the tall agent said, thumping the paper. "Colonel Majeskie, we're taking you in for . . . . ."

"You have the right to . . . . .," the short agent said louder, starting to sweat.

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside stood up, pounding his fist on the desk. "I'm not Majeskie! I'm not Majeskie!"

"Here's your signature, Colonel," the tall agent persisted. "And this is your office -- you said it was."

"Look at my nametag!" Lieutenant Colonel Burnside stormed. "What does it say?" He pointed to the tag sewn above his left pocket reading: BURNSIDE.

The tall agent looked, then shook his head. "You can get in a lot of trouble that way . . . impersonating a lieutenant colonel."

"Who sent you idiots here?" Lieutenant Colonel Burnside demanded.

The tall agent stiffened indignantly. "Senator Jefferson sent us."
"Send that bastard in here, then!"

The tall agent shook his head. "Not much chance, Colonel. He said you threw a paperweight at him last time. In fact, we may just add that to the charges of murder."

"A paperweight?" Lieutenant Colonel Burnside blinked his eyes. "You're all insane!"

"And you're under arrest, Colonel. Now, come along peaceably, and there won't . . . ."

"You have the right . . . !" yelled the short agent, quite exasperated from being ignored and interrupted.

"You don't have any right to take me anywhere, you goddamned idiot!" Lieutenant Colonel Burnside yelled.

"We're arresting you," the tall agent said in a tired, flat voice, "for the murder of . . . ."

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside grabbed the paperweight from the desk and threw it at the tall agent's head. The agent ducked and came up swinging a right that caught Lieutenant Colonel Burnside on the chin and dropped him stunned to the floor.

". . . an unspecified number of Vietnamese civilians," the tall agent continued calmly, and for attempted assault with a paperweight, on two counts." He clapped handcuffs on Lieutenant Colonel Burnside and lifted him over his shoulder. He walked out the door, with the shorter agent following, yelling, "You have the goddamned right . . . listen to me! You have the goddamned right to . . . ."
The Awards and Decorations clerk looked at the papers he held in his hands. Then he looked at the door. After a moment, he went to the door and called out, "What about the medal, sir?" He looked again at the papers. Mission unaccomplished, he thought. "Rats," he muttered and went out the door, knowing no more about the incident then he had when he'd come. He thought of the chewing-out he would doubtlessly get when he got back to Awards and Decorations.

"Rats," he said aloud and kicked the door as he stood on the steps outside the office. He noticed the old man sitting on the steps crying softly and holding a knife to his throat. "Oh, shut up," the clerk muttered. "You don't know what trouble is." He wished he had a knife to put to his throat -- it would certainly be better than reporting back to the captain with nothing to report. "Oh shut up!" he growled as the old man blubbered louder. "You should be in my shoes." The old man shook his head and sobbed. The forlorn clerk walked off muttering to himself.

General Rush slammed his fist down on his desk and yelled. "Hartley!"

Pat Robertson poked his head in the door. "Major Hartley's not here, sir. He went to Saigon to hijack a plane home."

General Rush pulled a watch out of a drawer and threw it across the room. Pat Robertson ducked outside just before
the watch sailed out the door and crashed in the hall.

General Rush got up and walked to the window for the hundredth time that day. He stared out at the privates who were filling sandbags around his headquarters. He opened the window. He waited a moment until one of the men laughed at something another had said.

"Keep the goddamned noise down and get your asses to work!" he bellowed.

The man quickly stopped laughing and resumed filling sandbags. General Rush closed the window and waited. Nothing. Always, after he yelled at Major Hartley, General Rush felt a great purgation that cleansed his system like some spiritual enema, refreshing his very soul. But now -- nothing.

He went back to his desk and sat down. He pulled all the watches he had accumulated out of a drawer and began winding them. After a moment, General Rush could stand no more and slapped them all away and sat back heavily in his swivel rocker.

"Horseshit."

Nothing, it seemed, was much fun anymore, since Hartley had left. The only thing, in fact, that General Rush had really liked to do was yell at Hartley. He guessed it was because Hartley was a major. Privates and lieutenants and even captains were too meager to be yelled at, and colonels were dangerous because they might soon become generals and, besides, most of them were about to retire anyway and weren't
affected much by yelling. Colonel Majeskie was one who took yelling fairly well, by crouching and cringing and whimpering, but he was such an incompetent bastard that General Rush really hated to be around him and had actually wondered once or twice if colonels could be put on permanent latrine duty.

General Rush sighed. He didn't want to admit that he missed Major Hartley, but he had to admit he wasn't enjoying himself since Hartley had left. His throat hurt from yelling at the enlisted men. It had never hurt when he'd yelled at Hartley. He sprang from his chair and went to the door.

"Hartley!"

Fat Robertson padded up to the door nervously. "Sir, Major Hartley's not . . . ."

General Rush frowned. "Get my jeep ready. I'm going to Saigon, goddamnit."

Fat Robertson saluted several times and then disappeared.

General Rush sat for a moment at his desk, wondering where he would find Major Hartley. If he was hijacking a plane, he would probably be at the airport, Ton Son Nhut. He picked up a pen from his desk and started to put it in his pocket. Then he remembered it was his own desk and even his own pen. Goddamnit, he thought, it was time to get to Saigon. He couldn't even think straight without Hartley around.

In his own way, General Rush had to admit, he missed the sorry bastard. Like you miss a toilet when it's broken or a football when it goes flat. As he opened the door, General
Rush decided he had taken Major Hartley too much for granted in the past and that he would try to be kinder to the bastard in the future.

"Hi, General."

General Rush, just outside his door, looked up startled. Roxie, the Donut-Dolly, winked at him. "Ready for your rub-down?"

"Don't bother me, goddamnit," General Rush growled, pushing past her. "I'm in a hurry." He growled his way down the hall and disappeared out the door.

Roxie stood alone in the hall, bewildered and angry. As Fat Robertson puffed by, she grabbed him by the arm.

"Where's the general going?"

Sweat rolled off Fat Robertson in rivulets. He panted. "Saigon," he said quickly between gasps. "Saigon, that's, whew, where he's, whew, going. Saigon." He hurried off down the hall.

"Why?" Roxie called after him.

Fat Robertson kept puffing down the hall on his stubby fat legs, well aware that General Rush would court-martial him if the jeep wasn't ready to go.

Roxie was puzzled. She scratched her head with long scarlet fingernails and then smoothed out her shiny dark hair. "Saigon?" she said to herself. Why would he go to Saigon. She stopped the next soldier who came by, a tall, gangly PFC.
"Why would anyone go to Saigon?"

The young clerk was puzzled a moment. "Well ... I ... I guess to have a good time."

Roxie raised one eyebrow. "You mean ... to get a girl?"

The young clerk blushed. "Well, yes ... I mean ... ."

He excused himself and went into an office.

A whorehouse!

Roxie the Donut-Dolly stamped her foot, feeling the blood grow hot under her well-tanned skin. The bastard was going to a whorehouse!

Roxie paced up and down furiously in the hall. She felt she had been insulted beyond repair. "Oooo ... oooo ... ," she repeated angrily. After all the times she had given him massages, complete with extras -- now he was dropping her. She stamped her feet as she paced. She felt her honor was at stake -- what could those slant-eyed witches give him that she couldn't? The clap, she thought bitterly, or hoof-and-mouth, and it would serve him right. Why would he give up a handsome American girl like herself for some nasty old whore in Saigon? Did they know their trade better than she did? She couldn't believe that. Perhaps she charged too much. But what was a hundred dollars to a general?

She stopped a soldier passing by. It was the same young clerk she had stopped earlier. He tried to sneak by her, but she caught him urgently by the arm.
"How much is a blow-job in Saigon?"

The clerk crumpled the papers he was carrying and tried to straighten them out as he stuttered in amazement. "A wh-wh-wh-what?"

"A blow-job," Roxie repeated impatiently. She saw that the clerk was a bit slow. "You know," she coaxed, making a noise with her mouth like a baby with its bottle.

The clerk nodded nervously and crumpled the papers again. "I know, I know," he stammered. "It's just that . . . I mean . . . I'm not used to being, uh, asked things like . . . I mean . . . here in the, uh . . . by a . . . a . . . ."

The clerk looked around nervously, then peered at her closely. "You want to know . . . uh . . . you want to know how much a . . . uh . . . ."

"A blow-job," Roxie helped him, making the noise with her mouth again.

"Three dollars," the clerk said quickly.

Roxie raised both eyebrows. "That's ridiculous. Liar!" She slapped the clerk soundly on the cheek, making him drop his papers. Then she turned and strode into General Rush's office, leaving the clerk standing bewildered in the hall.

A sergeant came out of an office and looked at the clerk. Then he looked at the scattered papers. "Better pick up those papers, Holmes. When you get 'em all back together, take 'em in to General Rush's desk."

The clerk burst suddenly into tears and ran down the hall and into the latrine.
"Jesus Christ," the sergeant muttered. He bent down and started picking up the papers. "Why they stick all the goddamned loonies in headquarters, I'll never know." He straightened up and looked at the crumpled papers in his hand. "Damned things'll have to be typed over now," he said to himself. The sergeant shook his head and walked back into his office, re-counting silently the days until he went home.

In General Rush's office, Roxie the Donut Dolly pondered the problem. What it boiled down to was the simple fact that General Rush was a cheap bastard who would give up a blow-job from a handsome young American girl for a blow-job from a foul-mouthed, slant-eyed, slope-headed Saigon whore . . . just to save a measly ninety-seven dollars. Well, she wouldn't let him. Her honor, she decided was at stake, as well as her paycheck, and she could not let everything go down the drain, or down the throat of a Viet Cong harlot. She would go to Saigon.

In the hall, Roxie saw the young clerk coming out of the latrine. "What's the biggest whorehouse in Saigon?" she asked him.

The clerk screamed and ran back into the latrine.

Roxie was quite startled. She wondered briefly why the army put all its loonies in headquarters. Then she turned and went out, determined to get to Saigon and drag back her best client.
The hospital was dark and quiet except for a hoarse 
gasping from the man with the near-gangrenous foot, Private 
Bing.

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher looked at his watch. Ten-
fifteen. Only fifteen minutes before the doctor would come 
to make his last check of the night.

It was time.

The chaplain eased out of bed, being careful not to 
wake Lieutenant St. James. The chaplain looked tenderly at 
the lieutenant, who was sprawled on the floor asleep. He 
was a good boy. He had sat all these days watching over the 
chaplain, praying for his recovery. And Chaplain Beaumont-
Fletcher knew that his recovery was largely due to the boy's 
prayers.

He also knew, however, that the doctors had helped a 
little. And he knew further that the gasping man would die 
soon without medical attention. With that thought in mind, 
the chaplain managed to get himself onto the floor. It was 
the first time he had stood up in weeks, and his knees were 
shaky. Oh Lord, he prayed silently, give me strength. He 
had no idea whether he could lift the gasping man, but he 
had to try. He found when he breathed deeply that his chest 
had healed almost completely -- the bullet had been extracted 
easily from the lining of his lung, and the wound was covered
now with toughening scar tissue.

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher reached down and put one arm under Private Bing's neck. Very carefully, trying not to notice Private Bing's groans, the chaplain slipped his other arm under the man's knees. Another groan came out, so loud this time that the chaplain stopped moving and waited a moment to see if anyone had heard. There was no sound, except Private Bing's pained breathing.

Turning his eyes toward the ceiling, the chaplain prayed for strength. Then, summoning all he could from his own weak body, he closed his eyes and pulled upward with all his might. He felt his chest ache and throb. His arms trembled from straining. He opened his eyes. He was standing between the beds, holding the groaning man in his arms! Tears sprang to the chaplain's eyes. Oh, if the lights were on now, he thought, so that God could see this miracle!

The chaplain thanked God for giving him strength. He maneuvered around in a circle and placed Private Bing on his own bed. Then he collapsed on Private Bing's bed. The effort had drained him. He lay on Private Bing's bed and panted and smiled.

He had done it! They couldn't ignore the man now -- he was in a registered bed! The chaplain listened. Footsteps. Just in time! Oh Lord, he prayed, thou art good and punctual! Within a minute, the chaplain had fallen happily into a deep sleep, worn out from his blessed task.
It was the young doctor who was making the rounds. Being the youngest doctor in the hospital, he was always given the last check of the night. As he reached Private Bing's bed, where the chaplain now lay curled darkly in sleep, the young doctor paused. He leaned briefly on the cart he was pushing. He was well-aware of the orders to ignore the man who occupied the unassigned bed, because he wasn't listed on the ward-sheet. But the young doctor also knew the man's foot was becoming gangrenous. And tonight he was determined to do something about it.

Orders or no orders, he couldn't let the man die just for the sake of army regulations. He had already set up the operating room, and everything was ready for the operation. The young doctor, himself, would perform the amputation and then wheel the man back to his bed and nurse him secretly back to health. Damn the orders! he thought angrily. A man's life was at stake.

Quietly, he wheeled the cart up to the bed, not daring to shine his flashlight. Tenderly, he lifted the snoring chaplain onto the cart. In the dark, the young doctor could hear hoarse gasping from the chaplain's bed. The chaplain must be having complications, he decided. He would have to check in the morning. Very quietly, he pushed the cart into the main aisle between the rows of beds and out toward the
hall. Just before he got to the door, it swung open slightly. The young doctor froze.

"What's going on, doc?" a voice whispered.

The young doctor was relieved to find it was Jeffries, the young black orderly, a quiet buck sergeant who planned to go to medical school when he got out of the army. He was the one man in the hospital the young doctor felt he could trust. He explained the situation to the orderly, who eagerly offered to help. Now grateful for the intrusion, the young doctor gave the orderly directions on preparing the patient for amputation of the left leg below the knee. Then he went hurriedly back to his rounds. With the orderly Jeffries helping, he could finish his rounds, as this was the last ward.

The young doctor listened as the cart squeaked faintly down the hall toward the operating room. Then he turned on his flashlight and started down the aisle, quickly flashing his light on the beds, anxious to get started on the operation. As he passed by the chaplain's bed, he noticed the harsh breathing, labored and phlegmatic arising out of the dark shape on the bed. How strange -- he had thought the chaplain was recovering nicely. Well, he would check more carefully in the morning. Right now, a man's life was hanging delicately in the balance. The young doctor walked quickly down the aisle toward the hall doors, feeling good inside.
General Rush realized when he got to Saigon that he had no idea where the airport was. He stopped his jeep at a roadside stand. He didn't like talking to gooks, but he didn't want to ride around looking at them all day, either. "Where's the airport?" he yelled.

A bare-chested, barefoot Vietnamese boy of about twelve came out to the jeep. He looked it over and kicked the tires. "Cut that out, you little Jap," General Rush growled. "Where's the goddamned airport?"

The boy thought a moment, then grinned, revealing black rotten teeth. He jumped into the jeep beside the general, who was flabbergasted.

"Get your Jap ass out of my jeep!"

The boy shook his head, still grinning. "I no can tell where airport is," he said, "but I show you."

General Rush glared at the boy. Then he put the jeep into gear and took off. He hunkered down in the seat and hoped to hell he didn't see anyone he knew. "Jap bastard," he muttered.

The boy grinned and nodded.

After several hours of winding through the narrow, crowded Saigon streets, General Rush stopped the jeep and turned to the boy. "All right, goddamnit, you've led me around this Jap town for . . . ," he began angrily.
The boy grinned and pointed down a very dark alley. "Two blocks," he said. "Two blocks to the airport."

General Rush glared at the boy again. Then he turned and peered down the alley. It was difficult to believe that the big U.S. airport could be right in the middle of a Saigon slum. He decided to shoot the boy. A general didn't have to put up with such bullshit. He pulled his .45 automatic and turned around.

The boy was gone.

General Rush looked around him. He realized that he was stranded alone in one of the scurviest parts of the scurviest town in the world. He had no idea how to get out.

Sitting in his jeep, General Rush got madder and madder. He made up his mind to shoot the very next Jap he saw. Suddenly, the boy came strolling out of the dark, shadowy alley, grinning and wearing a U.S. army cap and an M.P. armband.

General Rush wasn't fooled by the get-up. He fired three shots at the boy, who leaped terrified back into the alley. After a minute or so, General Rush heard a scared voice from the alley.

"Hey, you G.I. You no shoot! I take you to airport now!"

General Rush shot again into the alley.

"Hey, G.I.!" the voice cried out. "Airport right here!"

General Rush shot into the alley two more times. "You lying Jap bastard!" he yelled. The army's smallest helicopter
couldn't get into that alley.

The boy suddenly emerged from the alley, grinning broadly.

General Rush aimed at the boy's head and pulled the trigger. He was amazed to hear the empty click. He tried again. Another click.


General Rush grabbed the boy by the ear and shook his head until spittle flew from his mouth. "Take your own god-damned luggage," he growled. "Now get going. I want to see a goddamned airport down that alley." He realized how ridiculous the whole notion was, but it was no more ridiculous than being lost in the lousiest part of Saigon.

The boy rubbed his ear and walked into the dark alley. General Rush followed, not knowing what awaited him but fairly certain it wasn't an airport. He could barely see the boy ahead of him.

"Around this corner," the boy said, still rubbing his ear.

General Rush followed the boy around the corner and stopped dead still. He squinted into the sudden bright sunlight. As his eyes adjusted to the light, General Rush shook his head and blinked. What he saw was as difficult to believe as the idea of an airport in a Saigon slum.
"Airport," the boy said proudly.

General Rush hardly heard the boy. He stared straight ahead at the acres of U.S. planes neatly arranged in rows as far as the eye could see. They all seemed to have been damaged, but most of them appeared to be repaired sufficiently to operate. Many pieces of planes lay all about. General Rush stared at the planes. Then he noticed something else.

In the middle of the large clearing stood a palatial house three stories high, gleaming white and polished so that it looked, under the bright sun, like a giant square pearl.

"Terminal," said the boy, grinning. He pointed toward the big house. "Now, you give me tip," he said, holding his hand out. "I take you to airport -- you give me tip."

General Rush glanced at the boy irritably. "I'll give you a kick in the ass, you little Jap." He kicked the boy smartly in the pants and walked on toward the big house.

The boy ran and got in front of him and held his hand out again. "Hey, you G.I.. Be sport, huh? Give me tip. My family hungry. You give me tip, huh?"

General Rush thought of the silver Seiko watch he had unconsciously, or half-consciously, slipped from the boy's wrist earlier. He took it out of his pocket and gave it to the boy, who looked it over and bit it a couple of times.

"Thanks, G.I.," the boy sneered. "You numbah ten, give me cheap watch." He put the watch in his pocket and turned to leave. General Rush kicked him in the pants and sent him sprawling into the alley, then walked on toward the house.
Just as he mounted the wide marble steps of the house, General Rush was swarmed by a half-dozen Vietnamese girls, all heavily-lacquered and perfumed and all clad only in short kimonas that wouldn't stay closed. General Rush cursed and swung his arms wildly at the girls. They tittered and continued to surround him and try to unzip his pants. One of them pointed excitedly to the stars on his collar.

"General!" she squealed. "Oooo General!" The others squealed and tried even more ardently to unzip General Rush's pants.

"Goddamned Japs!" he roared and slugged one of the girls. She fell off the steps and got up brandishing a knife. Just as she was preparing to leap on General Rush's back, a loud crack sounded. General Rush turned to see the girl holding her wrist, trying painfully to extract it from the coils of a long black whip that had wrapped around, causing her to drop the knife. General Rush followed the whip's length to the wide porch, where a tall, crew-cut American held the whip handle. He was dressed in a blue silk kimona. After a second, he jerked the whip, and it unwound from around the girl's wrist. She whimpered. The tall American said something in Vietnamese, and the girl was led into the big house by the other girls.

"Greetings, General," said the man, grinning broadly. "Welcome to the airport."
General Rush looked hard at the man. "Who are you and what the hell is that dress for?" He pointed at the kimona.

The man grinned. "Native custom. Come in, General," he said, gesturing toward the door. "I believe this is your first time here, isn't it?"

General Rush picked up the switchblade the girl had dropped and put it in his pocket. "I'm looking for Major Hartley," he growled. "Sonofabitch stole my jeep," he added, not wanting to admit that he missed Hartley.


General Rush looked around. "What the hell kind of airport is this?"

The tall man smiled. He walked to the door of the house and looked back at General Rush. "Come in -- I'll show you the place."

General Rush came up the steps reluctantly and stopped at the door to peer into the man's calm blue eyes. "Who the hell are you, anyway?"

The tall man grinned. "Dyke, General. I own the place, sort of." He turned and walked inside, motioning for General Rush to follow.

"Dyke . . . Dyke . . . ," General Rush muttered as he entered the house. The name sounded familiar, damned familiar.
Senator Jefferson sat at his desk drinking coffee and shaking his head. He rubbed his hands together nervously and arranged the arrest reports on his desk. He felt like a rat caught in a maze. Not only did he have Colonel Majeskie in his hands, he also had a captain and a major who had evidently turned VC and been caught at Rong Song. There had been a couple more in the captured group, but preliminary investigation had narrowed the suspects down to the major, who was the apparent head of the group, and the captain, who had been carrying a Viet Cong weapon when caught. But Senator Jefferson also had a Major Virelli, who had been arrested for impersonating a staff officer while actually being the only VC taken prisoner at Rong Song. It was all very confusing.

Senator Jefferson didn't like the office he had been given for his interrogations. It was at one time a storage room for the hospital, but now it was not used, and although it still stood right next to the Third Evac hospital, it was rickety and dusty and hot. And then, of course, there were the prisoners.

The man arrested as Colonel Majeskie denied the fact that he was Colonel Majeskie. He swore instead that he was a Lieutenant Colonel Burnside. The group arrested wandering naked in the paddies near Rong Song, at least one of whom was armed with a Communist AK-47 rifle, claimed to be General Rush's personal staff. And this last suspect, Major Virelli,
swore up and down that he knew nothing about Rong Song at all, that he had been Transportation officer at Division Headquarters and had been arrested when General Rush had accused him of being the G-2.

Senator Jefferson sighed. Just a short while before, everything had been crystal clear — Colonel Majeskie had admitted to being the commander at Rong Song. Now here was a group claiming to be General Rush's personal staff, a fact that would put General Rush at the scene of the massacre (and obviously in charge). And Major Virelli, an American officer, charged with being a prisoner caught at Rong Song. And then Colonel Majeskie reportedly claiming not to be ... it was all too much.

Senator Jefferson put his head in his hands. All he wanted was a confession — one measly confession. He had had it when Colonel Majeskie had admitted leadership at Rong Song, but now .... Crap! Senator Jefferson thought, pounding his fist on his desk. The idea of a long, complicated investigation loomed before him like a huge indistinct monster silhouetted in the road, not easy to bypass. A clear-cut confession, like Majeskie's, could do away with the monster, but now even the man who was arrested as Majeskie claimed not to be Majeskie. And the American people would never be able to sustain interest in the massacre if the investigation stretched out too long.
Senator Jefferson shook his head slowly. The old horse laughs from the floor of the Senate seemed to be coming back stronger than ever to play about his ears and remind him of his painfully unmilitary background, his lack of camaraderie with the army, his failure to unravel the simplest massacre. He slammed his fist down on the desk just as the door opened.

"Sir? We have Colonel Majeskie," an agent called.

"Burnside, goddamnit!" Lieutenant Colonel Burnside shouted as he was led handcuffed into the room by the short agent.

Senator Jefferson squinted as he looked at the prisoner. "Why, you're not . . . ." He squinted harder. "You're not Majeskie . . . ."

"This is the one you sent us to arrest," the short agent said defensively. "He was sitting right there at the desk . . . ."

Senator Jefferson was confused. "If this is Majeskie, then who was the other one I talked to?"

The agent shook his head. "Well, now, Senator . . . this is the one that was in the office when we came to arrest Majeskie. And, besides, he said it was his office. Now, that sounds to me like we got Majeskie." He folded his arms in conclusion.

Senator Jefferson looked carefully at Lieutenant Colonel Burnside, who stuck his tongue out. Senator Jefferson frowned. "You really are Colonel Majeskie, aren't you?" he asked,
hoping for a "yes" and a speedy end to the confusion. "Aren't you?"

"Bullshit!"

Senator Jefferson glared. "I believe," he said angrily, "that you are Colonel Majeskie, and I plan to prove it before a court-martial." He hoped the man would break down and confess to being Majeskie, even if he wasn't.

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside was astounded. "Court-martial?" He looked behind him, then back. "Me?"

Senator Jefferson smiled. He could see that the man was breaking under the accusation. He thought of his triumphant return to the Senate floor, where a standing ovation would signal his unanimous election to the Armed Forces Committee.

As Lieutenant Colonel Burnside was mulling over what had been said to him, the door swung open. Senator Jefferson looked in surprise at the two handcuffed muddy men who came in, followed by the tall agent, who grabbed them and tried to get them out, explaining as he struggled, "They broke away from me, Senator . . . they ran in here . . . the one there that says he's a major said he wanted to talk to you . . . I . . . come on, there, I don't want to have to . . . come on . . . sorry, Senator . . . ."

Senator Jefferson glared at the intruders.

"Who are you?" he demanded.
Major Pearson stepped forward. "We are General Rush's staff -- or at least part of it. The sonofabitch left us for dead at Rong Song. Now, what the hell is all this about?" He fumed as he shook his handcuffs at the senator.

Senator Jefferson shook his head sadly. He could see in his mind the triumphant scene on the Senate floor, and suddenly he saw his wife marching to the podium and holding up to his chest a half-finished ski sweater: "Oh, Wayland, you and your jokes." He closed his eyes.

Finally, Senator Jefferson turned to the short agent. "What about the other one?" he asked, hoping that Major Virelli had escaped. The short agent ducked out and came back dragging Major Virelli, handcuffed and fuming.

"Get your hands off me!" he yelled at the short agent, who desperately hung on to Major Virelli's arm.

"Let him go," Senator Jefferson said wearily. He saw his wife chuckling as she led him off the Senate floor. "Oh Wayland . . ." his wife smiled affectionately. "Oh shut up," he said aloud to her.

"I will not shut up!" Major Virelli shouted. "If I am charged with something, tell me!"

"Just what the hell is all this, anyway?" Major Pearson demanded.

"The sonofabitch is insane," Lieutenant Colonel Burnside muttered.

"I didn't do anything," Captain Renfro whined.
Senator Jefferson listened to the angry officers. He put his hands over his ears and tried to think. At last, he found what might be a way. All he wanted, he decided, was one man. One. It was all becoming too confusing. The whole simple massacre was blossoming into a hydra-headed, monstrous affair. Senator Jefferson raised his hand to quiet the noisy officers.

"Gentlemen," he said, mustering all his stamina and bravado, "the whole purpose of this investigation is to track down the man responsible for Rong Song, and I believe that man" — he looked at Lieutenant Colonel Burnside — "that man is Colonel Majeskie."

The officers looked at each other. Rong Song, they knew, had been an awful mess, but no more awful than the rest. It had actually been a rather typical operation -- the encirclement, the artillery, the sweep. The only reason for making such a fuss, the officers each reasoned, was that Colonel Majeskie, long an incompetent, had finally been singled out for his incompetency and would be relieved. But, as the men looked at each other, they still couldn't figure out the handcuffs, the CID agents . . . .

"What the hell does that have to do with us?" Major Pearson growled, angry and puzzled.

Senator Jefferson felt his confidence returning. Things were coming swiftly toward a climax. In a few seconds, he would have his man. He looked at the officers. Now was
the time. He pointed at Lieutenant Colonel Burnside.

"You will all go free," he said, "if you will simply identify this man."

Major Pearson and Major Virelli and Captain Renfro looked at Lieutenant Colonel Burnside. Then they all looked at each other. Captain Renfro was the first to speak, blurting out the name eagerly. "That's Lieutenant Colonel Burnside."

Senator Jefferson, who had been smiling and sitting at his desk, stopped smiling and stood up. His mouth fell open.

"You mean . . . ?"

"Goddamn right," Lieutenant Colonel Burnside said.

Senator Jefferson was bewildered. "Then where . . . where's Majeskie?"

The officers looked at each other and shrugged. "How about taking these things off, you crazy bastard?" Lieutenant Colonel Burnside held up his handcuffed hands.

Senator Jefferson banged his fist repeatedly on his desk. "No, no, no, no, no!" He glared wild-eyed at the shocked officers. He saw his massacre disappearing in a garbled version of the chain-of-command. His star criminal, Colonel Majeskie, was gone. But, by God, here was a whole group of criminals! He looked at them -- one of them must have been responsible.

"One of you will pay," he whispered hoarsely. "I must have one of you."
There was a moment of silence. The officers all looked strangely at each other and then at Senator Jefferson. Finally, Captain Renfro spoke up timidly. "What for?"

Senator Jefferson felt his whole body shake. How could they all so cold-bloodedly play innocent? He felt he could no longer control himself, could no longer maintain his dignity among the murderers. Sobbing, he fell across the desk. "What for? For Rong Song!" he sobbed, thinking of the poor dead civilians and of the laughter of his colleagues, "For Rong Song!"

Captain Renfro shrank back, startled at the Senator's behavior. "Oh." He looked at the others for help. They all stared at the senator. "Well," said Captain Renfro with a shrug, "I . . . I guess you want Colonel Majeskie. I mean, he was in charge . . . ."

"Aaaaaggghhh!" Senator Jefferson went into such convulsions that he rolled off the desk and lay panting at the feet of the surprised officers. "Please," he whispered, "please . . . won't one of you confess?"

"To what, goddamnit?" Major Pearson demanded.

"To Rong Song," Captain Renfro told him.

"Oh, shut up, you idiot," Major Pearson growled. "Now, look here," he said to the senator, who still lay on the floor. "Rong Song was nothing to be proud of." All the other officers nodded. Even Major Virelli nodded. Although he
hadn't been at Rong Song, his head had begun to nod involuntarily several minutes earlier.

Major Pearson continued, "But if you want to find the incompetent sonofabitch responsible, you'll have to look harder." He paused a moment. "The man you want is General Rush. That sonofabitch planned the whole operation . . . and he left his whole staff to die . . . !"

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside broke in. "Majeskie's the bastard to hang," he said, remembering how Colonel Majeskie had turned a routine operation into a circus with his antics in the helicopter. "Majeskie was the bastard in charge."

Major Pearson frowned. "Now, see here, Burnside, Majeskie only did what he was ordered. Rush is the one."

Major Virelli spoke up. "General Rush came back early, Pearson, so Majeskie was on his own." He paused. "But somebody ought to hang General Rush, too, the bastard." Major Virelli remembered only too well his arrest by General Rush for no reason at all.

Senator Jefferson lay on the floor, his head turning back and forth as each man spoke, his head turning like a man watching a tennis match.

"General Rush wouldn't do anything wrong intentionally," Captain Renfro said timidly. "He's a general."

"Oh shut up, Renfro," Major Pearson growled disgustedly.

"Well," Lieutenant Colonel Burnside insisted, "it's still Majeskie's ass that oughta get reamed."
"Bullshit!" Major Pearson was getting angry. He glared at Lieutenant Colonel Burnside. "Maybe you're the one should be hung, Burnside. You were in charge on the ground, you know!"

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside was shocked. "Me? I only did what I was told. You're not about to pin that ridiculous mess on me." He could see his fine combat record blemished by the mess at Rong Song -- no weapons recovered, only one prisoner. "You're more guilty than I am, goddammit!" he yelled at Major Pearson. "You were the head of the general's staff -- you probably planned the whole thing!"

Senator Jefferson's head came up briefly at the word "guilty." A faint hope began to lift him. He came to a sitting position on the floor while the men argued above him.

Major Pearson laughed loudly. "General Rush never told anybody shit about any operation!"

Senator Jefferson was on his feet. He looked wildly from one man to the next as they argued heatedly, each trying to convict his superior, each accusing the other of botching the operation. Suddenly, he could stand no more -- the room whirled with curses, was stuffy with criminals, filled with the laughs of the distant senators. He leaped up on his desk.

"Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!" he yelled.

The men looked up at him, amazed.
Senator Jefferson panted excitedly. "You're all guilty. You're all guilty."

"Bullshit," Lieutenant Colonel Burnside said heatedly. "I'm not," Captain Renfro whined. "I didn't do anything."

"Oh shut up," Major Pearson growled at him.

"There's only one solution," Senator Jefferson panted. "Only one just solution . . . ." He paused. "You will all draw straws." He nodded at the short agent, who ducked out and came back quickly, carrying a handful of straws and grinning.

"This is ridiculous," Major Pearson said disgustedly.

"The sonofabitch is insane," Lieutenant Colonel Burnside muttered.

Senator Jefferson surveyed them all from his desk top. "I will have my man. I will. Draw!" he ordered.

"This is absurd," Major Pearson said angrily. "This won't prove a damn thing. I already told you General Rush is the one you want . . . ."

"Bullshit," Lieutenant Colonel Burnside said. "Majeskie's the . . . ."

"Rush!"

"Majeskie!"

"Draw!" Senator Jefferson screamed. "Or you'll all hang!"

Grumbling and cursing, the officers each took a straw from the short agent's hand. He was quite pleased with the Senator's scheme and was proud to play so integral a part in
solving the mystery of the massacre. He looked up in awe at the senator, who stood on the desk with his arms folded, puffing loudly. The short agent felt as if he were looking at a truly great man. What a brilliant plan, he thought as he offered the last straw to Captain Renfro, who had been trying to hide behind a chair. The wisdom of Solomon, the short agent thought admiringly.

Captain Renfro sniffled. "I know I've got the short one -- I know I do."

"Oh shut up, Renfro," Major Pearson growled.

"All right, gentlemen," Senator Jefferson said, or rather proclaimed, proud as pudding of his brilliant scheme to detect the heinous criminal among them. "Let's see the straws. Put them on the table. Stand behind your straws."

All the men looked at their straws. They laid them on the table. Captain Renfro whimpered loudly.

"Oh, Jesus, Renfro," Major Pearson muttered.

Senator Jefferson looked at the straws, smiling broadly. He looked at the officers, then back at the straws. His smile dropped into a tight thin line. He got down on his knees and looked closely at the straws. Then he stood up, wild-eyed, at the short agent, who stood grinning by the door and shaking his head in admiration.

"Noooooo!" Senator Jefferson moaned and rolled off the desk. "No, no, no, no," he groaned as he lay on the floor.
The short agent ran to him quickly and kneeled beside him. "Senator! Senator! What's wrong?"

There were tears in Senator Jefferson's eyes when he spoke. "You idiot . . . ," he moaned. "Look . . . at the straws."

The short agent quickly gathered up all the straws and looked at them. "What's wrong with them?" he asked, puzzled.

Senator Jefferson was on his feet, glaring at the short agent. "They're all the same size!" he screamed.

The short agent looked at the straws. He blushed. "Well, sonofagun . . . ."

"I told you who your man was, anyway," Major Pearson said. "It's General Rush."

"That's right," Lieutenant Colonel Burnside interrupted. "It's Colonel Majeskie."

"Rush!"

"Pearson!" Lieutenant Colonel Burnside yelled, glaring at Major Pearson.

"Burnside!" Major Pearson yelled back.

Senator Jefferson's eyes went back and forth. A cry of desperation rose quietly in his throat.

Suddenly the door banged open.

"I did it! Oh my God, I did it!"

Everyone turned to look.
Lieutenant St. James stood just inside the door, shaking and crying. He collapsed on his knees. "I did it," he sobbed, "I did it. I'm the murderer!"

Senator Jefferson sat down heavily at his desk and stared at the hysterical lieutenant. He laid his head down on his arms and tried to cry. He felt a hand patting his shoulder and heard a voice: "Oh Wayland," the voice chuckled affectionately, "you and your jokes."

Major "Bull" Dyke led General Rush through a huge room carpeted in deep red, under a magnificent sparkling chandelier, into a parlor decorated with fine old paintings and ornately-carved furniture.

"Sit down, General." Major Dyke pointed to a chair. General Rush glanced disdainfully around the room. "Looks like a goddamned whorehouse." He looked back at Major Dyke. "Now, where's Hartley?"

Major Dyke sat down and smiled, putting his hands before him in a praying position. "What makes you think your Major Hartley is here, General?"

"Is this the airport?" General Rush asked gruffly, suspecting that it wasn't.

Major Dyke smiled. "That's what we call it."

General Rush looked around suspiciously. "It doesn't look like a goddamned airport to me."
"Depends on what you want from an airport, General."


Major Dyke got up and walked across the room, where he pulled a velvet cord. "Why don't you go upstairs and relax, General? I'll find your Major Hartley -- if he's here -- and send him up."

Two kimona-clad Vietnamese girls came quietly up behind General Rush. "These girls will show you to your room."

General Rush eyed Major Dyke suspiciously. "Is Hartley here?"

"If he is," Major Dyke replied, motioning the girls to take the general upstairs. They latched onto his arms and tugged.

General Rush grunted. "Jap bastards."

The girls led him upstairs.

Major Dyke waited a moment until he heard the door close upstairs. Then he walked to a small closet.

"You can come out now," he called through the door. After a short time, it opened, and Colonel Majeskie cautiously entered the parlor. He looked nervously around.

"Are you sure he's gone?"

"Positive," Major Dyke answered.

Colonel Majeskie looked around again. Then he turned to Major Dyke. "Bull, you've got to help me," he pleaded.

Major Dyke sat down at the table and looked calmly at his manicured fingernails. "I don't know . . . ," he said
cagily, remembering how generous the colonel could become in desperation, remembering the pension Colonel Majeskie had once promised him for leading all the brigade's battalions.

"Bull, I'll give you a personal pension, right out of my own pocket . . . ," Colonel Majeskie moaned, seeing his medal dangling by a thread, while Major Dyke held the scissors.

"You already owe me that, Colonel," Major Dyke reminded him. "But I'll tell you what . . . I'll do it . . . ," Colonel Majeskie grabbed Major Dyke's hand and tried to kiss it, ". . . on one condition."

Colonel Majeskie was over joyed. He could see himself playing croquet on the President's lawn, watching the President's nimble daughter spin cartwheels across the grass.
"Anything, Bull, anything," he agreed eagerly. "You just name it."

Major Dyke grinned. "Your desk." He saw the colonel's jaw drop. "I'll do it for that armored desk of yours." He had always been fascinated by the desk, and he could see how it could be quite useful to someone in such a risky business as himself.

"My desk?" Colonel Majeskie moaned. Giving up his desk would mean he would be totally vulnerable to the hidden sniper outside his office window, easy prey for the disgruntled soldiers in the brigade or for the old man with the knife. He would be helpless in mortar attacks. He shook his head rapidly, sweat pouring from his face. "My desk?" he moaned
again, hoping he had misunderstood.

Major Dyke smiled and nodded.

"Anything but my desk . . . !" Colonel Majeskie pleaded. He thought of his home in Georgia, his wife, his children, his pension, but before he could say anything, Major Dyke got up and pulled the velvet cord.

"Think it over, Colonel," said Major Dyke, as two Vietnamese girls appeared and took Colonel Majeskie by the arms. "The desk for the medal. Now go upstairs and rest. You can make your decision tomorrow." He nodded to the girls, who pulled Colonel Majeskie up the stairs, his knees buckling as visions crowded his mind. Colonel Majeskie moaned as he was taken away, seeing himself sitting mangled in a wheelchair on the President's lawn, watching the President's nimble blonde daughter turn cartwheels across the grass.

Major "Bull" Dyke pulled the cord again. Two more girls came in. "See that the gentlemen get everything they ask for," he told them. They bowed and snapped their bubble gum and left chattering.

Major Dyke sat down. He looked at his desk, a solid ivory, hand-crafted relic from the country's ancient days of affluence and tradition and royalty. He thought of Colonel Majeskie's desk, as hard and practical as a tank -- the perfect desk for a business man. Yes, he thought, he could get Colonel Majeskie's medal for him, complete with papers -- he had only to drop a word to one of his clients
in charge of Awards and Decorations. He thought again of the fine armored desk. He smiled, feeling quite certain the colonel's greed would overcome his cowardice.

Major "Bull" Dyke had done well for himself since leaving the Third Brigade. Finding suddenly that the war was becoming a losing proposition, with all the pull-outs and the increasing number of no-fire zones, Major Dyke had decided his Officers Club and his bootlegging to the enlisted men would soon cease to bring in profits equal to the risk and time they took.

So, without a word to anyone, he had left the basecamp one early morning and had come to Saigon, where he used the money he had saved to set up a small refuge for chaplains. He called his little place "The House of God", and for a while it was a well-kept secret of the American chaplain's corps. But Major Dyke was forced to abandon the project because of two unpleasant developments. At first, the chaplains had paid promptly and willingly for their entertainment, but as time wore on, many began skipping out without paying, leaving behind little scribbled prayers for Major Dyke's continued success and for the salvation of his soul. Major Dyke remembered one particular chaplain who had claimed the morning after that he had been drunk and unconscious when he was brought in and thus couldn't have done anything to anyone.

Major Dyke had already begun to consider chaplains deadbeats when their second little trick came to light. The
chaplains, he discovered, were holding chapel (for God’s sake!) actual church services for the girls. And the most detestable part of it all was that they were taking up a collection! Major Dyke had almost gone bankrupt before he realized where the profits were going. Scrounging what he could from the till, he had closed the house permanently, taking with him a deep hatred for chaplains. Irreverent bastards, he thought each time he had one booted out of his new house.

Major Dyke had stumbled upon his new house quite accidentally. After "The House of God" folded, he had decided to leave the country and fly to Bangkok to set up a house there. Not being familiar with Saigon and not wanting to ask the M.P.’s for directions to the airport, he had found a young boy with bad teeth who had volunteered to take him. After several hours of walking through dark little alleys and crowded streets, the boy had brought Major Dyke to a large clearing, several acres in size, where dozens of damaged American planes and helicopters lay about a large house that looked as if it had once belonged to wealthy French plantation owner, who had no doubt been driven out years ago by the Viet Cong.

When Major Dyke had turned to ask for an explanation, the boy was gone, leaving the major alone somewhere in the depths of Saigon. Realizing immediately that he had been set up for a mugging, perhaps even for murder, Major Dyke
had turned back around quickly. He saw four short figures, standing darkly ahead of him, just inside the shadows of the alley.

After only a moment's hesitation, Major Dyke had crossed his fingers and smiled. "Nice place you've got here," he said, gesturing toward the house. "I'll bet I could make that into a real money-maker. How much do you want for it?"

The figures had stood silent a moment and then huddled together in the shadows, all whispering at once. As Major Dyke watched the figures and heard them buzzing unintelligibly, he had smiled harder and felt a little sorry he had been so intolerant of the chaplains.

After a minute or so, the four men had come out of the shadows quoting prices and grinning. Thus, "the airport" began and grew under Major Dyke's sure hand into a plush and popular spot for high-ranking U.S. officers. It became as successful a pleasure palace as it was a salvage area for downed U.S. aircraft. Major Dyke had worked out as part of his scheme with the local Viet Cong and Vietnamese black marketeers an agreement allowing the salvage crews to continue using the premises to restore the damaged aircraft.

Under the circumstances, Major Dyke felt there was little else he could do. He had no idea how to get out of his present location. He had agreed to pay a special messenger for bringing in clients. All in all, the operation was a tremendous success. Major Dyke was, of course, forced to pay
percentages to both the Viet Cong and the M.P.'s who stumbled sometimes upon the house, but the phenomenal profits from his girls and from occasional muggings (which he didn't encourage but couldn't prevent, anyway) kept him well into the black. Major Dyke was getting rich.

But something bothered Major Dyke. Despite the fact that he was accumulating a sizable fortune, he had begun to doubt that he would ever get a chance to spend it. So long as the house made money, he knew he would be allowed to stay and operate it, but should he try to take his fortune and leave, he knew he would be killed immediately. The Viet Cong were watching him, and it would do no good to try to bribe them -- they would simply do away with him and take the money he had saved. He was only worthwhile to them as long as he ran the house -- if he decided to quit, his life would be worthless. There was little honor among these people, Major Dyke had concluded. Those who sold him black market goods were always jacking their prices up so high that he was forced to ask much more than he should when he sold them to visiting colonels and generals.

Colonels and generals were actually the mainstay of Major Dyke's exclusive operation. Since they rarely knew their way around Saigon, they invariably had to ask directions. Their drivers always went immediately to the cheap bars or massage parlors, so the colonels and generals ended up asking the natives for directions. Thus, the clientele streamed
in at a steady pace and were escorted out discreetly by the messenger who had brought them. It was, all in all, a very successful operation.

But Major Dyke, despite his mounting fortune, felt trapped. So long as he lived, he would be a rich man, but how long would he live? And would he ever see the outside world again? The problem weighed upon him constantly, but like most insurmountable, insolvable problems, gave way in the end to a lesser, but more immediate, dilemma.

While Major Dyke could sometimes accept his imprisonment amid luxury as fate, his real dilemma grew more pressing daily. As he watched the two gum-snapping Vietnamese girls chattering their way upstairs, Major Dyke felt again the awful pain that hit him now several times a day. He was incredibly horny.

As strange as it might seem, Major Dyke was becoming celibate. He could no longer tolerate the sight of the giggling Vietnamese girls who worked for him in the house. He needed, he longed desperately for, an American girl. He thought, sometimes at night when his genitals ached, that he would give everything, the whole fortune he had made, for just one roll with a pretty American girl. He longed to hear English flowing like bright sweet water from the luscious full lips of a gorgeous American girl. His pain was made so much more intense by the fact that he feared he would never again see one. He would give it all up, he knew, even
his freedom, if he could just ball one, one time -- one
gorgeous, luscious, juicy, breathtakingly-beautiful American
girl.

Major Dyke sat now at his ivory desk and groaned as
he thought of American girls, blonde, brunette, and red-heads.
in nylon panties and bikini bras, in bikini panties and no
bras -- soft and hot and juicy American girls lying on clean
white sheets. He grabbed his throbbing genitals and moaned.
"Godamighty," he groaned. "Godamighty damn!"

As he sat suffering noisily at his desk, a short, skinny
Vietnamese girl approached. Seeing him clutching his crotch
and sweating and moaning, she raised her eyebrows questioningly
and tapped his shoulder: "You want suckee, boss?"

Major Dyke closed his eyes and groaned louder.

The girl shrugged and walked away, her gum cracking like
popcorn.

When Lieutenant St. James woke up, he looked around the
dark hospital ward briefly. Everything was quiet. He put
his hand up on the chaplain's bed, as he did whenever he
awoke at night. He sighed in relief to find the chaplain's
leg there.

Lieutenant St. James sat on the floor and stretched.
He felt good. It had been so long since he had smiled . . .
and now, wonder of wonders, miracle of miracles, he felt a
tingling in the corners of his mouth. Was it a smile emerging?
Could he do it? His lips began uncontrollably pulling themselves out and up. He waited tensely, not quite sure how to react to a smile on his own lips.

While he waited, Lieutenant St. James thought fondly of the chaplain. Such a fine man! When the world had looked its darkest, when Captain Watson had cruelly implied that Lieutenant St. James had murdered his RTO's, when no one in the battery would volunteer to be his RTO, when every ounce of self-confidence had gone up in the smoke of mines and mortar rounds . . . in the midst of the confused carnage that had enveloped Lieutenant St. James's very soul, the chaplain had emerged. The chaplain had volunteered to be RTO, had placed his very life in Lieutenant St. James's hands, had trusted him when everyone else had turned away.

Tears misted his eyes suddenly and spoiled the smile of contentment he had felt coming. But he didn't care. It was impossible to conceal his emotions for the man who had given him back faith in himself. The wounding of the chaplain had been God's last test, and the chaplain's recovery would be God's final stamp of approval on his humble lieutenant.

As the tears dried, Lieutenant St. James felt the smile returning. The chaplain was recovering. God was guiding the multitudes of white corpuscles through the chaplain's blood to mend the hole in his chest. And with the recovery of the chaplain would come the absolution of Lieutenant
St. James. At last he could mourn his dead and mangled radio men without feeling guilty, without feeling that he had been responsible. God had shown that He knew Lieutenant St. James was innocent by sending the chaplain, one of His Anointed Ones, into his care and delivering him out again -- alive.

The smile was working. Lieutenant St. James felt like smiling just thinking of the smile. Oh, that chaplain was a wonderful man! He had shared his meals all this time with Lieutenant St. James, because the hospital refused to feed visitors, even live-in visitors. Lieutenant St. James loved the chaplain dearly for what he had done. In a couple of days, the chaplain would be well enough to be discharged, and Lieutenant St. James would be free to return to the battery a free and innocent man -- he would walk smiling into Captain Watson's office and file his "conscientious objector" papers. God and the chaplain had shown him he wasn't a murderer -- he would live up to their faith in him.

Overcome with emotion, Lieutenant St. James sprang to his feet and threw himself over Private Bing's legs, sobbing. Private Bing groaned.

Lieutenant St. James stood up, terrified that he had hurt the chaplain. He leaned close to Private Bing's face. "I'm sorry . . . ," he murmured. "Forgive me, chaplain . . . ."

Private Bing groaned again.

Suddenly, Lieutenant St. James straightened up. His mouth fell open. He wiped the mist hurriedly from his eyes
and leaned over the bed again, staring horrified into the
dim face he had thought was the chaplain's.
"Aaaagghhh!"

Figures popped up in beds around the ward, like dark
silhouettes in a shooting gallery.

Lieutenant St. James backed slowly away from the chap-
lain's bed, his knuckles pressed to his mouth, his head shaking
in horror. Turning wildly around and around in the ward, he
heard the angry chorus rising around him:
"Loud-mouth sonofabitch!"
"Somebody kill that crazy bastard!"

Kill! Lieutenant St. James ran wildly down the aisle,
hearing the word mounting like a ferocious giant demon be-
hind him -- kill! Thoughts hammered at him mercilessly as
he ran out the ward door and down the hall: he had killed
them! All of them! All the fine young radio men, he had
had slaughtered cruelly. And God, oh God, he had killed
the chaplain! He had led that fine man into battle and had
killed him! Had lain asleep while they had carted the chap-
lain out of his bed, dead as a doornail, and replaced him
with another! Oh, Lord, there was no forgiveness for such
sins! He was doomed! Doomed!

Lieutenant St. James ran out of the hospital and into
the dusty road, beset with demons and sins and guilt that
tried to beat him back into the primeval dust. He struggled
to stay on his feet. Knowing in his tortured mind that he
couldn't endure the misery clamping down hideously on him, Lieutenant St. James sought, like a fugitive, a place to unburden his soul.

He turned into the first lighted door he found, the tiny workshed where Senator Jefferson was unravelling the massacre at Rong Song.

Major Spenser, the chief surgeon at the hospital, fidgeted in his bed. He reached beside him and felt somewhat relieved -- his saw was still there. He had dozed off briefly and dreamed that he had found the mysterious, nameless patient with the mangled foot. The man was hobbling out the side door of the hospital, trying to make a getaway. In the dream, Major Spenser had chased him, yelling for him to stop. He had leaped at the man and tackled him. As he wrestled the man down, he had seen the bloody bandages on the man's foot -- he knew he had the right one. And then the dream had turned to a nightmare. For in one awful moment, Major Spenser had discovered that he had forgotten his saw! He had almost panicked. Pulling out a pocket knife, he had tried to hack off the foot, but the bandages were too thick. The man had managed to escape, leaving Major Spenser lying on the floor, staring helplessly at his pocket knife.

Major Spenser had awakened in a cold sweat. He got out of bed. There was no use trying to sleep. When he did
manage to doze off, he was haunted by hideous nightmares in which the mysterious patient escaped with his ruined foot intact. Major Spenser lit a cigarette and decided to walk around the hospital a while. He picked up his saw and stuck it securely in his belt.

As he walked by the operating room, Major Spenser noticed a light on inside. He pushed open the door and was surprised to find Sergeant Jefferies, the black orderly, bent over one of the tables.

"Jefferies, what are you doing here this time of night?" He looked closely at the form of Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher on the operating table. "Who's that?"

Sergeant Jefferies, knowing the young doctor didn't want Major Spenser to know about the operation on Private Bing, stammered a hurried reply: "It's . . . it's just a patient we brought in for some, uh, tests . . . ."

Major Spenser looked suspiciously at the orderly, then at the chaplain, whose head was covered by a sheet that draped over his whole body. "What's wrong with him?" Major Spenser didn't like intrigue in his hospital if he wasn't in on it. "Why'd you bring him in the operating room?"

"The . . . uh . . . the light is much better in here . . . uh . . . ." Sergeant Jefferies pointed toward the big fluorescent light, wishing the young doctor would get there.

Major Spenser sensed that he was getting the run-around.
He began to get angry. "Now, see here, Jefferies," he threatened. "I want to know . . . ."

"Want to know what, sir?" the young doctor asked from the door. "I'll tell you what you want to know."

Major Spenser turned to the young doctor and scowled. "Just what are you trying to pull off here?" he demanded.

"A foot, sir," the young doctor replied. He turned to the shocked orderly. "As long as he knows, he might as well know it all."

Major Spenser felt his heart suddenly beating harder. "A foot? You mean . . . a foot?" he could scarcely believe what he'd heard.

"We're going to have to amputate," the young doctor said. "This man's foot has almost become gangrenous."

Major Spenser looked at the lump under the sheet. "You mean . . . this . . . this is the one brought in with that chaplain?"

The young doctor nodded. "He was assigned to the wrong bed, somehow, so no one paid any attention to him." He frowned. "They all said he was AWOL for not being where he was supposed to be."

Major Spenser had already pulled out his saw and was hovering over the chaplain. "We'll court-martial him later," he said feverishly, realizing this was the man who had haunted his dreams. "Right now, we've got to get his foot off!"
The young doctor frowned. "Don't you think you'd better sterilize your saw?"

Pulling back the sheet from the chaplain's feet, Major Spenser was almost in a frenzy. "There's no time for that now," he panted. "Besides ... besides, if he's got gangrene, a few more germs won't hurt him any!" He positioned his saw over the chaplain's foot. Suddenly he stopped and stared at the foot.

The young doctor stepped forward and grabbed the surgeon's hand. "I can't let you operate this way, sir," he said sternly.

Major Spenser didn't notice the young doctor's interference. He was staring at the foot with a puzzled look on his face. "Uh ..." he turned to the young doctor, "... uh, which foot?" he asked.

The young doctor looked at the feet. He drew back. "My God!" He called the orderly, who looked and gasped. All three men stared at the chaplain's feet.

The young doctor was the first to speak. "There's nothing wrong with these feet at all!"

"Nonsense!" Major Spenser snorted. He saw another AMA Journal article going down the drain -- a timely battlefield operation, pulling a dying man back from the devouring poisonous jaws of gangrene, out of the clutch of death. He wouldn't give it up! Not again!

"Nonsense!" he growled. "It's only a temporary recession of the gangrene." He remembered Spec Four Johnson's strange
feet swelling and shrinking. "We've got to operate. If we wait for it to come back, it may be too late." He tried to put his saw to the chaplain's foot, but the young doctor kept holding his arm. "Let me go, you fool!" he yelled. "Do you want him to die?"

"No, I don't," the doctor said and held on tightly. He didn't understand what had happened, but he couldn't let the major cut off a perfectly good limb.

"Sir!" Sergeant Jefferies said loudly. "Sir!" He had lifted the sheet and was looking at the chaplain's face.

"Sir," he said to the young doctor, "isn't this the chaplain?"

The young doctor was afraid to let go of Major Spenser's arm to go look. He couldn't believe he had made such a disastrous mistake. He glanced at Major Spenser. What he saw horrified him: Major Spenser had switched the saw to his other hand and was busily sawing one of the chaplain's ankles. With a yelp, the young doctor grabbed Major Spenser around the neck and wrestled him to the floor.

"Stop, you fool!" Major Spenser yelled. "The man's dying!"

As blood from the chaplain's ankle onto him, the young doctor yelled from the floor, still holding the surgeon in a headlock. "Jefferies, get the chaplain out of here! Quick! Hide him somewhere! And stop the bleeding on that ankle!"

As soon as the orderly had managed to wheel Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher out the door, the young doctor stood up
and, grabbing a saw from a tray, positioned himself in front of the door. "Now, doctor," he warned Major Spenser, who was getting up, wild-eyed and rubbing his neck. "Now, doctor, I can't let you go after that man. He's the wrong one. I got the wrong one. That was the chaplain, and there's nothing wrong with him."

Major Spenser grunted and lunged at the young doctor, who managed to parry the thrust and push Major Spenser aside. Again the major lunged with his saw outthrust and was pushed away again. Panting heavily, he began hacking ferociously at the young doctor.

"You . . . young . . . you young . . . idiot . . . you . . . you can't do . . . this . . . to me . . . ."

The young doctor stepped back to avoid one of Major Spenser's lunges and slipped in a pool of the chaplain's blood. He fell hard on the floor. By the time he got to his feet, Major Spenser had leaped out the door and locked it.

The young doctor tried the door and found he couldn't open it. He looked at the blood on the floor and at the saw in his hand. He threw the saw across the room and sat down sadly on an operating table. He felt like crying.

Spec Four Mike Johnson lay nervously in his bed. This time he hadn't been assigned to the amputees' ward, but just being in the same hospital with Major Spenser sent chills up
his spine. The young doctor who had looked at him had smiled and said a week in bed would fix him up. But Spec Four Johnson was scared to death. The days were all right, but the nights utterly terrified him.

He remembered how Major Spenser had come sneaking through the halls up to his bed at three in the morning the time before, prepared to take his feet off. When the lights went out at night, Spec Four Johnson shook in his bed from sheer terror. He watched the dimly-lit corridor outside the half-open door at the end of the ward, half-convinced that he would see Major Spenser stalking the halls in search of victims.

That very night, in fact, as he was drowsily struggling to stay awake, Spec Four Johnson thought he had seen the mad Major Spenser peering into the ward, a surgical saw stuck in his belt like a pirate's sword. Oh God, he thought, blinking hard to stay awake. Perhaps he had only dreamed it as he had been dozing off. Or maybe his eyes were just playing tricks on him from lack of sleep. There were many explanations. Many.

Spec Four Johnson sat bolt upright in his bed and stared at the door until his eyes hurt. He went over in his mind the many explanations for what he'd seen. Only one stayed with him, and he kept his eyes firmly fixed on the door to the hall, petrified with fear.
Major Spenser panted heavily as he stood holding the locked door to the operating room. He felt the young doctor try the door and then go away. He braced himself and waited for the young doctor's body to come banging against it. He gripped his saw tightly, his hands sweating profusely. He would not be defeated! He would not be cheated out of his AMA Journal article! The full implications of what lay ahead slowly dawned on Major Spenser as he stood against the door, waiting to hack the young doctor to pieces: the patient's feet reminded him more and more of Johnson's feet, those remarkable feet that swelled up and returned to normal by the clock. My God! he thought, putting the two cases together quickly in his rushing mind. My God! It could be an epidemic! And this last patient's feet were much worse than Johnson's -- they looked much more normal! My God, he thought again and had to lean against a wall. From gangrene to nothing and back -- just like that! It was incredible!

Major Spenser finally realized that the young doctor wasn't going to come crashing against the door. He turned and looked both ways down the hall. Which way to go? He thought bitterly of the selfish young doctor and the ignorant, arrogant orderly -- they didn't understand. They didn't understand what an extraordinary infection was beginning right there in the hospital, right under their very eyes. And they could stop it! He could stop it! Tears filled
Major Spenser's eyes as he thought of the unsuspecting young men who might carry the horrible and nameless disease home with them. Oh, the horror! Major Spenser sobbed. He could see the young men dancing gaily with their sweethearts one fine moment -- lying swollen and gangrenous and stinking on the dance floor the next. Good God! How far would it go? Major Spenser shuddered. The young doctor -- the orderly -- fools! They could never understand!

As Major Spenser streaked through the halls, peering anxiously into the dark wards, he felt a growing sense of his own power rising in him like some exotic drug, creeping warm and golden through his veins. The awesome authority that would be his should he capture the infected man! He would be the expert on the new disease -- his article in the AMA Journal would prove it. Upon his word, and his alone, thousands would be called -- thousands of young men who were treading dangerously on potentially gangrenous feet. Healthy feet would be removed as preventive medicine -- lives would be saved by the score. Major Spenser's eyes misted as he saw himself standing before the head of the American Medical Association, humbly accepting the accolades of his peers, his colleagues joyously thumping him on the back. He saw himself swamped with medals from a proud army who promoted him to Surgeon-General. His eyes brimmed as he thought of humbly walking between the rows of wheelchairs at the huge parade in his honor, accepting graciously the kisses of mothers, the
eager handshakes of fathers, the grateful thanks of the
to each smiling young man.

These thoughts so clouded Major Spenser's eyes that he
fell over a food cart in the hall and was wheeled swiftly
headfirst into a wall. The force of the collision almost
knocked Major Spenser out, but, remembering the monumental
importance of his mission, he shook his head and fought to
stay conscious, fighting off the cobwebs that tried to lay
themselves painfully over his brain. He managed to lift
himself from the cart, and wiping the tears from his eyes
and the butter and peas from his coat, he thanked the good
Lord above for giving him the strength to enter the medical
field. He chuckled affectionately as he thought of his
mother urging him to be a carpenter. Oh Mother! he thought
warmly, oh Mother, if you could see me now!

Making sure his saw was firmly-tucked into his belt,
Major Spenser took off down the hall, filled to bursting
with the spirit of medicine and the overwhelming vision of
the thousands of wriggling feet arranged before him like
candies in a store. He ran down the hall, feeling like a
lucky child turned loose in a candy store, searching happily
and frantically for the one special piece that would mean
he had won the contest and could have his choice of the rest.
Spec Four Johnson tossed and turned nervously. It was hot in the ward, and he was terrified. Visions of the mad surgeon pounded his mind feverishly, relentlessly. He had to get out! Slowly, he swung his legs over the edge of the bed and put his feet on the floor. Still raw from the fungus and his own scratching, the feet were terribly tender and sensitive. He drew them up quickly, feeling the sharp pains shoot through them. He sat on the edge of his bed, rubbing his feet. He thought of the madman prowling the halls and jammed his feet back on the floor. He felt under his bed for the laundry bag that held his fatigues. Just as he was unbuttoning the last button of his pajama jacket, Spec Four Johnson stopped cold.

He heard a noise in the hall.

Footsteps, fast, like someone running.

Standing frozen, Spec Four Johnson could feel his heart slamming rapidly against his ribs, as if trying to escape.

Oh dear Jesus, he prayed.

Suddenly the dim light from the ward door was blacked out by the figure of a man.

Peering closer, squinting into the dark, Spec Four Johnson saw, to his horror, that the figure was crouching down, trying to see into the ward. Without warning the figure straightened up, and Spec Four Johnson saw a hand go into the air, waving a long object. His heart pounding,
Spec Four Johnson shook his head slowly as he tried to make out the object.

"Oh dear God," he muttered, "dear God." A thousand thoughts flooded his mind as he saw that the figure was waving a saw! Saws, flashlights, stumps of arms and legs all flashed in his mind. As he stood frozen, petrified, Spec Four Johnson saw the figure move.

It was coming into the ward!

He opened his mouth and screamed.

Major Spenser straightened up, startled. He squinted again into the dark ward where the cry had awakened many of the sleeping men. Suddenly, Major Spenser saw a pajama-clad figure running full speed -- right toward him!

Oh my God! he thought. His blood raced wildly. This was his man. Cornered like a gangrenous rat, he had decided to make a run for it. Here in the fungus ward, where only minor cases were kept, the man had hidden, and it was only by a blessed accident Major Spenser had come here. Hiding in the light-care ward, ironically hiding here among the fakers and goldbricks, was a man whose feet could mean the end of the era of the footsoldier, the beginning of a new life, free of the dreaded disease, whatever it was.

Major Spenser braced himself like a football player as the figure came charging toward him. It was now or never. If the man escaped, all was lost -- the article, the feet,
the lives . . . Major Spenser remembered his dream. He
clutched his saw tightly. He waited. He crouched and waited.

The startled men in the ward yelled in indignation,
unaware of the showdown that could save their feet and their
lives, unaware of the drama unfolding on the ward floor.

Spec Four Johnson had only one thought in his fevered
mind: he had to reach the door. He saw the light from the
door streaming brighter than ever, almost holy like a halo
in the sacred paintings, streaming around the crouched fig-
ure. Remembering vaguely his high school football years, he
slowed down five yards from the dark figure, planted his
foot and swerved sharply to the left.

He saw the surprised figure fall backwards as he streaked
by. He heard the yells from the men like the cheers from
the packed grandstands. For a moment, he was back in high
school, roaring past the safety man, heading for glorious
paydirt. He glanced down at his empty arm, crooked like a
halfback's -- no ball! Stopping suddenly, Spec Four Johnson
had the awful feeling that he had fumbled. He turned, in his
trance, to go back for the ball. He saw the sprawled figure
on the floor and heard the angry shouts of the awakened men.

Turning with a shriek, Spec Four Johnson tore into the
hall and didn't stop running until he got back to "A" battery.
General Rush was unhappy. He glared at the mess on the floor. "Goddamn Jap bastards," he muttered hoarsely.

He was getting hoarse from yelling at the girls who kept coming into his room offering to disrobe him. The last time, he had thrown his full water pitcher, but the girl had ducked out the door just in time, and the china pitcher had shattered against the door.

And now General Rush needed a drink of water.

"Goddamn Japs," he muttered hoarsely, wishing he hadn't thrown away his pitcher of water. Yelling at the girls had made General Rush much more aware, however, of how valuable Major Hartley was -- Hartley didn't keep coming back so often that the general got hoarse yelling, one good yell usually being good for the whole day. Also, General Rush's yelling voice was getting rusty with Hartley gone. But more than all this, there was that certain intangible rightness about yelling at Hartley. General Rush thought perhaps it was Hartley's rank or his appropriate humility. But whatever it was, General Rush knew that yelling at the girls or the privates filling sandbags or at Fat Robertson hadn't been the same somehow as yelling at Hartley. There was no satisfaction in yelling at peons -- only this damned irritable hoarseness. He had to find Hartley.

"Damn," he muttered. "Where is that sonofabitch?"

Even the cursing was harsh on his throat. General Rush knew it was time to act. He reached up over his bed and
pulled the green velvet cord. Within seconds, the door opened a crack and a timid, frightened face peeped in. General Rush recognized it as that of the girl he had tried to bean with the water pitcher.

"Get somebody to clean this mess up," he barked hoarsely. "And bring me some goddamned water."

The door closed quickly.

General Rush sat impatiently on the bed. If he didn't see Hartley soon, he would go find that fag with the crew-cut and the silk dress and shake him 'til his teeth rattled. General Rush banged his fist down on the blue silk bedspread. Jesus, he thought, nothing was right -- who ever heard of beating your fist on a goddamn bedspread? He was angry and frustrated. He couldn't yell without Hartley around to yell at, and he needed to yell -- but his throat was raw from so much fruitless yelling at the girls and everybody else that he wasn't sure he could yell even if he did find Hartley. Sometimes it was damned frustrating being a general.

Suddenly the door opened. A stooped male figure in a black silk kimona bowed its way into the room and began picking up the pieces of the broken pitcher.

Having had his heart and throat set on seeing Major Hartley, General Rush was infuriated to see another fag in a silk dress. He snorted and bounced off the bed and walked over to the bent figure and kicked it mightily in the butt, sending it sprawling into the puddle of water from the pitcher.
General Rush grunted with satisfaction and stood waiting for the fag to get up and be kicked again.

Slowly, the figure rose and lifted its head to look at General Rush. A puzzled and frightened look came over the face.

General Rush blinked. His mouth fell open.

"Hartley!"

Major Hartley's puzzled, frightened look changed abruptly to one of horror. He bolted for the door.

General Rush ran to the door and blocked it. "Hartley!" he yelled again, realizing in surprise that his voice had come back as strong as ever.

Major Hartley backed away from the door, holding his hands out in front of him to fend off any sudden attack, shaking his head. "I . . . I won't go back, General . . . I won't go back." He remembered vividly the fate of Major Virelli, the last G-2, hauled off by the M.P.'s without even knowing he was the G-2. Major Hartley was determined not to go back to that.

General Rush was puzzled. "Why the hell not?" He felt somewhat hurt that Hartley would refuse to go back with him.

"It . . . it's not worth it," Major Hartley said nervously, still backing away. "I . . . I won't be railroaded like Virelli . . . ."

General Rush walked to the bed and sat down. He tried to remember who Virelli was. Yes, he thought . . . yes . . . it was coming back . . . it seemed that Virelli had been
identified as a prisoner at Rong Song and had denied it.

General Rush looked at Major Hartley strangely. "You weren't a prisoner at Rong Song, were you, Hartley?"

"I won't be anyone's prisoner!" Major Hartley screamed, leaping past General Rush. He jerked open the door and ran into a room across the hall, slamming the door behind him.

General Rush ran across the hall and grabbed the knob of the door Major Hartley had entered. He shook it and jerked it, but the door was locked. He stood staring incredulously at the door.

"Goddamnit, Hartley, open the door!" he yelled. He waited but got no response. He did notice, however, that his throat felt much better. He decided firmly that he could not allow Hartley to get away -- he was better than a throat lozenge.

Major "Bull" Dyke tapped the general on the shoulder. "What seems to be the trouble here, General?"

General Rush glared disgustedly at Major Dyke in his red silk kimona. "What the hell have you done to Hartley, you Jap fag?"

"Hartley?" Major Dyke asked, confused.

"I don't know what you've done to him, you sonofabitch, but he didn't wear a goddamn dress when he worked for me!" General Rush rattled the door. "Now, open this door -- Hartley's in there."

Major Dyke smiled suddenly. "Oh, you mean the fellow in the black kimona. He came to us a while back looking for
the airport. He's been a bellboy, sort of, ever since. He said he didn't want to go back."

General Rush's face screwed up in anger. "Well, the sonofabitch is coming back, whether he likes it or not. Now, open the damn door!"

Major Dyke smiled and, shaking his head, opened the door. "It won't do you any good," he said, indicating the empty room. "These rooms are all connected by passages. He could be anywhere in the house by now."

General Rush glared at Major Dyke. "You'd better find the sonofabitch quick, or I'll have the M.P.'s out here."

M.P. The letters rang like a bell in Major Dyke's head. A raid by the M.P.'s would mean a chance of escape. His heart pounded. His mouth felt dry. "I'm, uh, sorry, General," he said with effort, "there's nothing I can do."

"We'll see," General Rush growled, brushing past and going down the stairs. "We'll goddamn see."

As soon as the general was out of sight, Major Dyke whistled and leaned against the wall. A boy of about twelve, with bad teeth, appeared.

"See that the general gets to the M.P. station," Major Dyke told the boy, handing him a wad of money. The boy nodded and left.

Major Dyke slumped heavily against the wall; visions of naked American girls, ripe and wet and hot, slithered through his mind. He grabbed his genitals and moaned: "Godamighty, Godamighty."
Seeing him slumped against the wall, holding his crotch in obvious agony, one of the girls stopped on her way down the hall and snapped her gum at him.

"You like suckee, boss?"

Major Dyke moaned harder and crumpled onto the floor. The girl shrugged and walked away down the hall, snapping her gum and holding a transistor radio to her ear.

Roxie the Donut Dolly peered warily into the darkness of the alley. The wavering shadows reaching from the edges of the pitch blackness frightened her, and she pulled back. The boy grinning at her with his rotten teeth made her even more nervous. She tried again to see into the alley but couldn't.

"Are you sure there's a whorehouse in there?"

The boy nodded, still grinning. He was excited by the girl's wanting to find the house. An American girl would most certainly mean an enormous boom in the business, as everybody would want to come and get a piece of a genuine American girl. So the boy wanted to do all he could to get the girl into the house. Of course, he knew she would never be allowed to leave once she got there. In fact, he had arranged to have the girl grabbed as soon as she got a little way into the dark alley and trussed up and carried into the house, in case she changed her mind. He was upset to see in her face now the fear of dark alleys he had found so
common in Americans. He knew he had to get her into the alley.

"Go on," he urged, pushing her gently and grinning.

Roxie jerked away from him, repulsed by his broken-toothed grin. Ugh, she thought, why won't these people take care of themselves? She backed away from the boy.

Seeing that the girl was still reluctant, the boy walked over to a pile of trash and, throwing most of it aside in a flurry, revealed an American jeep with two big white stars on its license plate. "See?" he said. "General in whorehouse."

Roxie recognized the jeep as General Rush's. She turned and looked into the alley. Then she turned back to the boy, who was fidgeting impatiently. "You go first," she said.

Thoroughly exasperated but seeing a glimmer of hope, the boy hastily agreed. "OK, OK, OK." He walked briskly into the alley.

Roxie the Donut Dolly gasped as she heard sounds of blows and kicks and muffled yells coming from the alley. She thought she recognized the boy's curses as he was hauled off in a sack toward the house.

Roxie was confused and a little scared. General Rush's jeep was there -- he must be in there somewhere. But after what had happened to the boy . . . why might they have done already with General Rush? And what might happen to her?

She turned quickly around and went to the jeep. She got in and started it. Roxie had no idea where the M.P.
station was, but she knew she had to find it if she was ever to see her favorite general again. Picking a street at random out of the many, Roxie roared off into the night.

"Who the hell is this?" Senator Jefferson demanded as he watched incredulously the lieutenant moaning and sobbing on his knees on the floor, just inside the door.

"That's St. James," Lieutenant Colonel Burnside said distastefully, remembering the lieutenant's sorry performance at Rong Song.

"I killed them, I killed them all... oh God!" Lieutenant St. James beat his head on the floor.

Senator Jefferson got up from his desk. Was the man saying what it sounded like he was saying? He walked quickly over to the fallen lieutenant. "Were you at Rong Song?"

Lieutenant St. James looked up with tears in his eyes. "Yes... yes... I killed the chaplain, too!" The confession was too much, and he collapsed sobbing on the floor again.

"The chaplain?" Captain Renfro gasped, horrified. He stared at Lieutenant St. James. "Why would anyone kill a chaplain? Oh. Oh!" He turned his head to the wall. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"Oh for God's sake, shut up, Renfro," Major Pearson said disgustedly. "He didn't kill the chaplain."
Senator Jefferson looked suspiciously at Major Pearson.

"Who did?"

"Nobody did, goddamnit," Major Pearson replied impatiently.

"Now, wait a minute there, Pearson," Lieutenant Colonel Burnside interrupted. "I saw the chaplain with a hole in his chest."

Senator Jefferson held up his hands. "Hold it, hold it!"

Everyone looked at the senator. He put his hands down, a little embarrassed at the attention. "It's... it's not my job to find out who killed the chaplain. That's none of my business. But that man said he killed them all."

"All who?" Major Pearson asked angrily.

"All! All everybody!" Senator Jefferson yelled. He was quite upset at the confusion surrounding the massacre. He resented these men who so craftily kept trying to cover it all up. "Now, look," he panted, staring red-eyed at the officers, "I'm going to get to the bottom of this. Somebody here is responsible for Rong Song."

The officers looked at each other. It was all getting very confusing. There had been many disastrous operations within the Third Brigade -- why all the fuss about this one? They all realized the operation had been a joke -- no Viet Cong, no weapons, only a night of wasted artillery on a village. But every operation ran more or less the same way. Rong Song had been actually no worse than others.
"I think you're making too damned much out of all this," Lieutenant Colonel Burnside finally said.


Major Pearson nodded. "Damned right. What the hell's all the fuss about, anyway?"

"I'm going to be sick," Captain Renfro said from the corner.

"Well, go outside, Renfro," Major Pearson said disgustedly. "Don't throw up in here. Nobody wants to watch."

"No!" Senator Jefferson screamed.

Everyone turned to look at the senator, who had again mounted the desk and was brandishing a pistol he had taken from one of the CID agents.

"Nobody leaves this room until I get a confession!" Senator Jefferson was on the edge of panic. He could see the senators laughing, and he heard his wife's affectionate chuckle. He glared at the roomful of callous, heartless men who saw nothing in a massacre to "make a fuss about." It was incredible! "We have ways," he whispered hoarsely, "of making you talk!" He waved the pistol at them. "Now . . . who did it?"

Captain Renfro whimpered loudly and covered his face.

The officers looked at each other for the hundredth time that day. What the hell was going on? They realized that the senator was a maniac and that he was determined,
for some unknown Congressional reason, to pin the blame for Rong Song on somebody.

"I confess," said Lieutenant Colonel Burnside. "It was Majeskie."

"Bullshit," Major Pearson growled. "It was General Rush."

"I did it!" Lieutenant St. James moaned from the floor.

"Oh my God, I killed them all!"

"I sure didn't do anything," Captain Renfro sniffled.

"It was somebody else."

"Oh shut up," Major Pearson told him.

Senator Jefferson stood on the desk, shaking his head, trying to follow the argument. Finally, he dropped his arms heavily to his sides. The pistol fell to the floor. His shoulders heaved convulsively. Tears formed in his eyes. He looked around pitifully at the men with a miserable questioning look on his face.

"Well, why don't you take him?" Captain Renfro said, pointing to Lieutenant St. James, who still lay shaking on the floor. "Heck, he said he did it . . . ."

Senator Jefferson looked at Lieutenant St. James. The man, he decided sorrowfully, wouldn't do. As much as he wanted a criminal -- this one wouldn't do. It would be the ruin of Senator Jefferson as a Senator. After the young reporter had thrown up on the Senate floor, there would be little tolerance for Senator Jefferson's hauling up before them a sobbing wretch like this lieutenant and proclaiming
"Here is the cold-blooded murderer of over a hundred innocent civilians." He could feel the quiet of the Senate and could hear the first chuckle starting somewhere out near Idaho and gradually multiplying until the entire Senate sounded like a burlesque audience. Senator Jefferson could feel his face growing hot and red. "He really did! He really killed them!" he heard himself crying into the microphone as the Senate literally broke up and wiped their eyes and held their sides. As clearly as if he were there, Senator Jefferson saw himself standing foolishly before the hysterical senators. He heard Lieutenant St. James sobbing. "Oh Wayland," his wife said from somewhere out on the Senate floor, "you and your jokes." Just before the scene faded, Senator Jefferson heard Lieutenant St. James throwing up on the podium behind him and felt the warmth spraying his back, to the amusement of the senators.

Senator Jefferson shook his head, horrified at the spectacle his mind had conjured up.

"No!" he yelled frantically. "No, no, no!"

"Take it easy, Senator," Lieutenant Colonel Burnside said, coming forward to comfort the distraught senator.

"Don't touch me!" Senator Jefferson whispered, leaping off his desk and standing behind his chair. "Don't come near me!" He glared at the officers -- they were all cold-blooded killers. He began fearing for his own life. "Help! Help!" he yelled. In a moment, the door opened, and the two CID men came in hurriedly.
"What's up? What? What?" the short one asked, wide-eyed.

Senator Jefferson pointed a shaking finger at the officers. "They're all guilty!" he said loudly. "Take them all away!"

The CID men looked at each other. Finally, the tall one spoke. "All of them? Well, where should we take 'em?"

The senator stared at the agent. "To jail!"

The short agent tugged the tall one's sleeve. "Say, they're political prisoners . . . I guess we could take 'em on the chopper up to Saigon. That's where that big M.P. station is." The tall one nodded and turned to the senator.

"Are they political prisoners, Senator?"


"Well," said the tall agent to the officers, "I reckon you gents better step outside and hop onto that chopper out there." He turned to the senator. "You coming, Senator?"

Senator Jefferson sadly shook his head. "I'm going into the back room and lie down."

The tall agent shrugged. "Well, you'll know where they are whenever you want 'em." Captain Renfro tapped him nervously on the arm.

"You won't take us up high and push us out one by one until someone confesses, will you?" he asked fearfully.

"Oh, for God's sake, Renfro," Major Pearson snorted. "Well, sometimes they do that," Captain Renfro said
defensively. "I read it in Time." He was hurt by Major Pearson's gruffness. "They really do."

"Not to Americans, Renfro." Major Pearson walked disgustedly out the door. Captain Renfro started to protest but then bowed his head and followed humbly, fearing for his life.

"What about him?" the short agent asked, pointing to Lieutenant St. James, who lay whimpering in his sleep on the floor. "Do we take him, too?"

"I don't know," the tall agent said. "Maybe we oughta ask the senator." He looked at the door to the tiny back room. "Naw," he said, "I guess we shouldn't bother him. Let's just leave him here. The chopper probably's got a full load, anyway."

The two agents went out.

On the cot in the stuffy little back room, Senator Jefferson stared up at the fan that used to turn lazily around on the ceiling but which was now paralyzed from disuse, chained down by countless dusty old cobwebs. Senator Jefferson's pulse was throbbing -- his head whirled -- tears lurked just under his eyelids. He had failed. He turned over on his cot. Oh, God, he thought, oh God, why me? A simple, clean-cut massacre: where was the villain?

Surely someone, some one tangible singular man, had been directly responsible. But who? The Senate, he knew, wouldn't accept a whole chain of command as villain. The
American people themselves would never accept a whole group of villains. Nor would they want a repentant, wretched and sobbing lieutenant. They cried out for a cold-blooded killer, one man who had been in charge and wasn't the least bit sorry for killing hundreds, or even thousands, of innocent civilians.

None of the men in the room that night could quite qualify. Colonel Majeskie, who claimed to be a Lieutenant Colonel named Burnside, had led the troops from the air -- but did that make him responsible for the artillery that had decimated the village? Major Pearson had only been the head of General Rush's staff -- that would never do. Major Virelli's function was, at best, shadowy. And Captain Renfro hadn't the brains to massacre himself. None of these could stand up to the rigid examination of the Senate or a military court-martial -- their insignificance would show through in a moment.

Who, then, was responsible?

Senator Jefferson had thought of perhaps arresting the battery commander whose artillery had fallen on Rong Song, but even that was not the answer. There was little glory in stringing up a junior officer, and, besides, once you wandered down into the chain of command, you stood the chance of getting hopelessly lost in the delicate muddle and of going completely berserk. No, Senator Jefferson wanted bigger game. His hatred of the military had intensified during the Rong Song investigation, as he watched the men
covering up the massacre, pointing the finger at each other like a bunch of school children. He hated them all. He hated, hated, hated them! They were all liars and murderers. He knew they were.

But could he prove it? And even if he could, which he doubted, would it help to convict a whole mass of underlings? Perhaps, perhaps it would satisfy the blood thirstiness of his nation, but ... there was something deeper ... something within Senator Jefferson ... something that had to be satisfied. No, he had decided, these peons, bloody liars and murderers though they were, these small-time hoods would not do. Even Colonel Majeskie, who had supposedly flown above the carnage and had now disappeared or was lurking in the guise of a lieutenant colonel -- even he was not enough. After promising himself and the Senate and the people of the United States an elephant, neither mice nor moles would do.

Senator Jefferson stared at the ancient fan and realized that he had been wasting his precious time.

He needed a general.

The realization shot through the senator like a drug. He popped up on the cot in a sweat. A general. General Rush! The first man he had talked to, long before he had gotten tangled up in the sticky webs of the chain of command, the man who had actually had the gall to deny that there had been a massacre, the coldest-blooded bastard of them all! The division commander -- the general!
Senator Jefferson leaped out of the cot and paced the floor feverishly. In his mind arose the Senate scene again, but this time the senators stood on their seats to cheer and put thumbs-down as General Rush was dragged, snarling and defiant, in handcuffs dragged to the speaker's podium. Senator Jefferson stopped in the middle of the room as the scene whirled around in his head: the cruel, heartless, unrepentant general stripped naked in the harsh light of truth, the chain of command demolished from the top, the entire military complex prostrate.

Senator Jefferson took a deep breath and sucked the entire scene into his lungs. His chest puffed out as he felt his soul and body filling with the wonderful vision. A general! Catch a goddamned general, and you've caught the army! Senator Jefferson felt so light-headed that he had to sit down.

As he sat on the edge of the cot, aflame with the miraculous simplicity of the solution that had been visited upon him so suddenly, one rotten little thought came creeping unwanted and persistent into his mind: where was General Rush? Senator Jefferson had tried to find General Rush right after the officers had all been rounded up by the CID men, but rumor had it that the general had gone to Saigon. The question now was how to find him. Fresh sweat broke out on Senator Jefferson's forehead. The vision of the cheering senators and the chained, helpless general
wavered like a mirage before his eyes. He heard somewhere far off his wife's amused chuckle.

Senator Jefferson shook his head quickly and stood up, chasing away the vision and the haunting laughter. "No!" he said aloud. "No, no, no, no!" He would not let victory be snatched from him! Without General Rush, he would be left with a hopelessly-muddled chain-of-command, filled to bursting with tiny little insignificant men endlessly accusing each other. But, with the general, Senator Jefferson would have at last the arch-criminal, the mastermind behind the terrible massacre. Moreover, he would have, hands down, that coveted seat on the Armed Forces Committee, perhaps even the chairmanship -- he would, by God, have the army! Revenge! Victory!

Uncontrollably excited by the brightening picture, Senator Jefferson decided to go to M.P. headquarters in Saigon, where the officers had been taken. There, he would wring from one of them the whereabouts of General Rush and then order, by authority of the President, every M.P. in Saigon to go out and bring the murderer in!

Filled with the crusading spirit of vengeance, Senator Jefferson snatched the door open and tripped over Lieutenant St. James in his haste to reach the opposite door. Once he had reached it, he opened it quickly and stood back a moment in surprise. He gasped.

Senator Jefferson peered into the darkness outside. "Who are you?" he demanded.
An old man, bent and ragged, an old Vietnamese peasant, emerged into the light, holding a knife and crying. "What are you going to do with that knife?"

The old man held up the knife. Tears stood in his eyes, which themselves were red and puffy from long days of crying. Senator Jefferson's vision of victory began to break apart. He suddenly saw it all vanish and himself lying dead with a knife in his heart. "No!" he said aloud. "I won't let you!" With a rush, Senator Jefferson lunged at the old man and shoved him to the ground.

Then he turned and ran purposefully into the night.

After a few minutes, the old man dragged himself inside the door of the storeroom. With great effort, he crawled to where Lieutenant St. James sat shaking his head, having been rudely awakened by the fleeing senator.

Suddenly, he spotted the old man crawling toward him. His heart stood still.

Not yet, he prayed, not yet. Lieutenant St. James didn't want to die yet. His soul was burdened still with sins, sins unspeakable, the very worst of sins. He didn't want to die a sinner.

He stared helplessly at the old man, like a rabbit petrified before a rattlesnake. He couldn't speak. He shook his head sadly. Not yet, he prayed, not yet.
The old man kept coming, muttering and crying, waving the knife.

No, Lieutenant St. James thought, growing desperately afraid. "No," he said, shaking his head. "Please, don't . . . ."

The old man kept coming, drooling and dripping tears, still gripping the vicious-looking knife.

Lieutenant St. James began to realize that his very soul was at stake. If the old man killed him, he wouldn't stand a chance of getting into heaven. A terrible fear seized his mind. No, he prayed, no. He felt paralyzed.

The old man stopped a few feet from him and slowly raised the awful-looking knife.

Lieutenant St. James saw his whole life go whizzing by as he collapsed in a dead faint.

The old man sobbed a moment, then took the knife away from his throat and left, crawling slowly and painfully out the door.

Lieutenant St. James lay still on the floor, unaware that his soul had been given a reprieve.

Roxie the Donut Dolly, having been luckily stopped for recklessly driving the jeep she had no idea how to drive, and for stealing a general's jeep, arrived at the M.P. headquarters just as the helicopter bearing the angry officers set down. The station-house was bedlam.
"Listen to me!" she screamed at the tired sergeant at the desk. "You must raid that whorehouse!"

"Whorehouse, hell!" the sergeant yelled back, as the curses of the handcuffed officers threatened to drown him out. "There's a thousand whorehouses in Saigon, lady! If we raid one, we'd have to raid 'em all!"

The noise from the officers drowned out Roxie's protests and foot-stomping.

"Take these damned handcuffs off!" Lieutenant Colonel Burnside yelled.

Major Pearson stormed around the room. "This is a god-damned circus! Where's that hokey senator?"

"I didn't do anything!" Captain Renfro cried, seeing the bars of a cell and going somewhat berserk with fear.

"Shut up, goddamnit!" Major Virelli yelled. "Shut up and let me talk!"

"You've got to raid that whorehouse!" Roxie screamed.

"Shut up, all of you!" the M.P. desk sergeant yelled. Getting no response, he pulled his pistol and fired into the air.

"I'm hit!" Captain Renfro moaned and slumped to the floor.

"You're not hit, you idiot," Major Pearson said coldly. The sergeant fired again. The room grew quiet.

"Now, look," the sergeant explained calmly, "I'm not sure what this is all about, but . . . ."
The short agent stepped forward. "These men are political prisoners," he said proudly.

"Like hell," Major Pearson muttered.

"All right! All right!" the desk sergeant held up his hand for silence. "They're political prisoners." He turned to the tall agent. "On whose authority do we lock 'em up?"

The short agent spoke up again. "On the authority of Wayland Mathew Jefferson, United States Senator."

The sergeant raised his eyebrows. "Now, that sounds like a crock of shit to me."

"Hear! Hear!" said Lieutenant Colonel Burnside.

The short agent was offended. "It's true! He's a real senator!"

"He's a damned maniac," Lieutenant Colonel Burnside suggested. "A raving maniac."

"Don't you talk that way about the senator!" the short agent said angrily, his round face reddening.

The M.P. sergeant raised his hand again. "All right, all right. Where is this senator? I'm not going to lock up a bunch of officers without a real reason."

"He's asleep," the short agent replied.

The sergeant looked at him strangely.

"He'll be here," the tall agent said. "I'm sure he'll come."

Roxie the Donut Dolly could stand the delay no longer.

"Sergeant, you just got to raid that whorehouse! You've . . . ."
"Oh, shut up about the whorehouse!" the sergeant growled at her. He turned to the tall agent. "Now, look, I can't lock these officers up without . . . ."

"Take these fuckin' things off!" Lieutenant Colonel Burnside yelled suddenly, holding up his handcuffed wrists.

"Oh, no," the short agent said. "Oh, no. Senator Jefferson wants those left right where they are."

"Who the hell is this Senator Jefferson?" the sergeant asked.

"He's doing an investigation of Rong Song," the tall agent explained.

"Oh." The M.P. sergeant looked at the tall agent and frowned. "Well, that explains everything, all right," he said sarcastically.

"The Third Brigade had a disastrous operation there," the tall agent went on.

"Tragic," the short agent added, shaking his head.

The sergeant knitted his brows. He was not in the least surprised that the notorious Third had screwed up another operation -- they always did. But why would anyone suddenly decide to send a senator to investigate this particular one?

"Why all the fuss?" the sergeant asked.

"Why, indeed, goddamnit?!" Major Pearson seconded.

"Get these goddamned things off me, you idiot!" Lieutenant Colonel Burnside yelled.
"I'm innocent! I'm innocent!" Captain Renfro chimed in from the floor.

"Sergeant," Roxie urged, "you've got to raid . . . ."

The sergeant backed away from them all and was holding his pistol in the air to fire again when the noise of a helicopter outside made everyone turn to the door. A few seconds later, the helicopter disappeared and Senator Jefferson burst into the room.

"Hooray!" the short agent shouted gleefully.

"Here's the goddamned idiot now," Lieutenant Colonel Burnside snarled. "Now get these handcuffs off me, or I'll . . . ."

"Are you Senator Jefferson?" the sergeant asked.

"By all means," Senator Jefferson replied, out of breath and panting. "I'm looking for . . . ." he began but had to stop to catch his breath.

"Senator!" Roxie came up to the senator and took his arm. "Senator, you must help me. Make them raid the whorehouse!"

The short agent rushed up quickly. "You take your hands off the senator!"

Senator Jefferson stared at the girl. "Young lady," he said indignantly, "I am here to locate General Rush. I have no interest in raiding . . . ."

"He's in the whorehouse!" Roxie cried delightedly.

Senator Jefferson was startled. "General Rush is in a whorehouse?"
Captain Renfro popped up from the floor, shocked. "He wouldn't do that! He's a general . . . !"

"Shut up, Renfro," Major Pearson muttered.

"That sonofabitch would do anything," Major Virelli growled.

"Get these motherfuckers off me!" Lieutenant Colonel Burnside screamed.

Senator Jefferson knitted his brows in thought. Finally, he slammed his fist on a table. "Sergeant," he said decisively, "I want every man you have at the whorehouse in fifteen minutes, by order of the President of the United States."

"Every man?" The sergeant was confused. In fact, he was flabbergasted. "Senator, now look, what about these prisoners?"

"Every man, he said," the short agent answered.

"I can't do that!" the sergeant growled.

Senator Jefferson felt his power growing. "You will, Sergeant, or you will feel the might of the United States Senate on your head."

The sergeant turned away disgustedly. "Jesus Christ," he mumbled. "Black," he said to the bewildered M.P. corporal standing there watching everything. "Black, round everybody up. We're making a goddamned raid." He turned back to the smiling senator. "All right, Senator, where is this whorehouse?"

Senator Jefferson turned confidently to Roxie the Donut Dolly. "Where is the house, young lady?"
Roxie looked puzzled. "I . . . I don't know . . . ."

Senator Jefferson's smile faded. "You . . . you don't know?"

The senator's distress began to infect Roxie. "I . . . no . . . I . . . ." She looked helplessly around for help.

"Some little boy took me . . . ."

Senator Jefferson sat down heavily and began mumbling.

Major Pearson stepped forward. "Uh, Miss . . . did this boy have . . . bad teeth?"

Roxie's eyes lit up. "Yes! Yes!" she said excitedly.

"Yes, they were all black and awful!" She remembered wondering at the time why the boy hadn't had them checked by his dentist.

Major Pearson smiled knowingly and stepped back. "Hmmm."

Senator Jefferson was on his feet immediately. "Do you know him, Major? Do you know where the house is?"

"It's called 'the airport'," Major Pearson said. "Yes, I know where it is."

Senator Jefferson was literally jumping up and down.

"Get those men together, Sergeant! Major, you come with us! By God," he said, clapping his hands, "I'll have that General's head."

"What makes you think I'll show you where it is?" Major Pearson asked calmly. While he liked the idea of General Rush being nabbed, he still had his own uncertain future to worry about.
Senator Jefferson looked deep into Major Pearson's eyes and tried to seem honest. "Major, if you lead me to General Rush, you're a free man."

"What about me?" Captain Renfro asked anxiously.

"Oh shut up, Renfro," Major Pearson said.

Senator Jefferson held up his arms to still the chaos swirling around him. "Gentlemen," he said solemnly, "let me make this clear. If the major leads me to General Rush, you will all be free men."

"What happens in the goddamn meantime?" Lieutenant Colonel Burnside asked bitterly.

"You'll have to stay here," Senator Jefferson said.

"In jail?" Captain Renfro moaned. "I've never been in jail. What if it takes all night?"

"Jesus Christ, Renfro," Major Pearson said. "One night won't hurt . . . ."

"You forget one thing, Senator," the M.P. sergeant said tiredly, wishing midnight would come so he could go off-duty. "There won't be anyone here to guard them."

"All right, all right," Senator Jefferson said impatiently. "We'll take everybody. Are your men ready, Sergeant?"

The sergeant looked outside, suddenly aware of a loud rumble shaking the building. "Jesus," he muttered. "Yes, Senator, I'd say they're ready." The rumble almost deafened everyone when the sergeant opened the door wide.

The officers and Senator Jefferson and Roxie the Donut Dolly and the two agents crowded around the door.
"Holy Christ," Lieutenant Colonel Burnside said softly.

Outside, the wide street in front of the M.P. headquarters was filled for three blocks with jeeps idling four abreast. The rumbling sounded gutty and filled with metal gears like a huge factory's grumbling innards.

Senator Jefferson turned to the M.P. sergeant and yelled over the noise. "Is this all your men, Sergeant?"

The sergeant frowned. "Should I take a roll-call?"

"Not necessary," the senator said, closing the door.

"I think we have enough." He turned to the officers, feeling very senatorial. "Gentlemen, this may be a very dangerous mission . . . ."

"Take these fuckin' handcuffs off me," Lieutenant Colonel Burnside said.

Senator Jefferson blushed. "All right, let's go," he said quickly, his hand on the doorknob. "Major Pearson, you ride in the lead jeep with me."

"What about the fuckin' handcuffs?" Lieutenant Colonel Burnside yelled as everyone filed out the door. "What about . . . ? Oh, goddamnit." He slammed the door as he went out.

Standing in the lead jeep, Senator Jefferson yelled inspiration to the assembled M.P.'s. "Gentlemen, if this operation is successful . . . !" The noise from the jeep was deafening as the drivers revved their engines, anxious to go. "Gentlemen, if this operation . . . !" he tried again.
Feeling a tug at his pantleg, Senator Jefferson looked down to see Major Pearson shaking his head and frowning. Quite embarrassed, Senator Jefferson sat down. "All right," he said quickly, "let's go."

Everyone in the lead jeep looked around. Captain Renfro panted up beside the jeep.

"What is it, Renfro?" Major Pearson asked gruffly.

Captain Renfro looked down shyly and toed at the dirt.

"Can I . . . can I ride with you?"

"Oh, Jesus," Major Pearson mumbled.

"Please! Please . . . that . . . that M.P. back there, he told me . . . ." Captain Renfro pointed back several jeeps to a big, burly M.P. who sat grinning behind the wheel.

"He said . . . he said when we got to the . . . the . . . ." He paused and blushed.

"The whorehouse?" Major Pearson asked impatiently.

Captain Renfro nodded. "He said he'd tell those girls to . . . to . . . to do all sorts of things to me!"

"Oh my God, Renfro," Major Pearson muttered.

"Please, can I ride with you?" Captain Renfro begged.

"Major," the senator said quickly, "we really have to go now."

"All right, Renfro, get in, get in," Major Pearson said disgustedly.

Captain Renfro joyfully leaped into the jeep. He turned around and stuck his tongue out at the grinning M.P. "Nyahh, nah, nah!"
"Turn around, Renfro," Major Pearson said tiredly.

Senator Jefferson sat with his head bowed, mumbling, as the jeep started to move. "If this operation is successful . . . ." For the life of him, he couldn't imagine what he would have said after that. He thanked his lucky stars the jeeps had drowned him out. He made up his mind to write out his speech to the Senate when he brought General Rush chained and defiant before the amazed senators. That would be the moment, his moment . . . Senator Jefferson felt a great lump in his throat as he saw his life mounting to that one stupendous instant in time, that one high pinnacle. He turned proudly to Major Pearson. "If this operation is successful . . . ," he began, but the major turned away, and Senator Jefferson trailed off, unable to imagine what he would say next.

The long columns of jeeps roared and rumbled off into the dark Saigon night, bearing down on the biggest, most secretive whorehouse in Viet Nam.

"If this operation is successful," the young doctor said to the orderly, Sergeant Jefferies, "we can save this man's life."

Sergeant Jefferies nodded. "We'd better hurry, though -- Major Spenser's still loose."

The two men could barely see in the dim washroom. Private Bing groaned on the table. "Shhh," the young doctor whispered.
Having taken Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher into the nurses' quarters to hide him from Major Spenser, Sergeant Jefferies had gone back to the chaplain's bed, suspecting that Private Bing would be there. He was. Neither the orderly nor the young doctor knew how Private Bing and the chaplain had come to switch beds, but now the important thing was amputating the infected leg of Private Bing. Very cautiously, the orderly had wheeled Private Bing into the washroom and had gone to the operating room to let the young doctor out. On the way to the washroom, the two men had twice had to duck into corners or behind doors to avoid Major Spenser, who was prowling the halls in a state of near-frenzy, muttering and growling, his saw cutting the air before him.

Sweat poured from the young doctor's face as he worked over Private Bing. Jefferies mopped the doctor's brow. The washroom, small and windowless, was stifling.

"Got it!" the young doctor said at last. "Quick, help me shut it off." The orderly moved swiftly and, finally, both men straightened up and looked at their work.

"Nice job, doc," Sergeant Jefferies said.

The young doctor nodded. "I think he's going to make it. Let's put him back to bed."

The orderly looked apprehensively at the young doctor. "Do you think it's safe? I mean, there's still Major Spenser . . . ."

The young doctor thought a minute. "Well, there's really
not much Spenser can do now," he said, pointing to the bandaged stump.

"I guess not." Sergeant Jefferies opened the door a few inches, then pushed it slowly open all the way.

"I'll go ahead and scout the hall," the young doctor said. "No sense taking chances now, I guess." He slipped quietly out the door. After a moment, he whispered hoarsely from down the hall, "OK, come on."

Silently, the orderly pushed Private Bing down the hall, locking to both sides nervously. Private Bing groaned in his drugged sleep.

"Shhh," the young doctor whispered.

After what seemed like an eternity to both men, Jefferies wheeled Private Bing to the door of the ward where he had been. Breathing a sigh of relief, the young doctor leaned against the wall.

"Aha!"

Both men turned abruptly as Major Spenser leaped out of the dark ward, waving his saw.

The young doctor lunged at the surgeon and wrestled him to the floor. "Get out of here!" he yelled at the orderly. "Get that man out of here!"

"You'll never get away with this!" Major Spenser yelled as the cart vanished around a corner. "That foot is mine!"

"We've already taken it off, Major," the young doctor grunted, struggling to keep the saw away from his face, where
Major Spenser insisted on waving it.

"You're lying! You're lying!" Major Spenser panted hysterically. "You don't want me to have it, but I will!"

As the two doctors thrashed about on the floor, amid the protests of the awakened patients, the young doctor suddenly froze.

"Listen," he said urgently, "listen!"

Something in his voice caused Major Spenser to stop struggling. Both men listened, locked in a still embrace.

"What is it?" Major Spenser whispered.

The young doctor's forehead wrinkled. "It . . . it sounds like . . . ."

"INCOMING!"

The shout from the ward sent the patients scrambling and dragging the more serious cases. They ran wildly into the hall as the whistle of the mortar round became louder.

Major Spenser and the young doctor scrambled to get out of the way, but the panic of the patients that sent a stampede down the hall caught the two doctors under a hundred bare feet. In a flurry of bare feet and bandaged knees and flying crutches, both men were knocked flat. The young doctor hit his head hard on the floor and was knocked unconscious.

Major Spenser lay dazed and listened to the first round thud somewhere near the nurse's quarters. He noticed the young doctor was out cold. A second round poured down and struck at the far end of the vacated ward.
Major Spenser jumped to his feet at the sound. He had considered for a moment lying still and letting the mortars end his miserable existence. Thwarted at every turn in his attempts to amputate the feet of the mystery man, he felt defeated. But suddenly a thought had brought back the will to live: a mortar attack often meant casualties. And casualties meant operations -- perhaps even amputation. He had to live -- his work must go on, Major Spenser decided excitedly. He leaped to his feet and ran down the hall.

A third round rocked the empty ward.

Major Spenser heard more whistling and thought of the bedridden patients in other wards who had no way of escaping the rounds. Yes! he said to himself. Yes, he would be needed. He would be needed when the rounds tore through the malaria ward and riddled the feverish men.

Streaking down the hall, Major Spenser thought of the young doctor. He didn't regret leaving him lying in the hall. Just let the jerk get hit and come to me for an amputation, Major Spenser thought -- I'll send him packing pretty quick.

As he ran out the front door, Major Spenser shut it behind him and locked it with his master key. He had seen some of the worst cases being carried to the bunkers. The sight had horrified him. What good would a mortar attack do in an empty hospital?
By now, the mortar rounds were tearing into every wing of the hospital. The explosions were coming one on top of another. Major Spenser saw one of the big bunkers only twenty yards away. He looked back at the hospital just as a delirious malaria patient was carried out a side door. "Damn!" Major Spenser said aloud. He looked back at the bunker. He looked at the hospital -- two more patients were carried to safety. An explosion blew a section of the roof into the air and sprinkled Major Spenser and the bandaged men in white pajamas and flying robes who ran by him.

Suddenly, Major Spenser made his decision. Disregarding his own safety, he ran to the side of the hospital and locked the door. He heard pounding of fists inside as he ran around to the other side. Quickly he locked that door and then headed for the last door -- the emergency exit and entrance in the rear. The bandaged patients streamed by him as the mortar rounds began ripping up the trees around the hospital and blowing great jagged craters in the sandy ground.

Major Spenser was furious at the men who passed him, heading frantically for the bunker. "Come back!" he yelled. He ran on, seeing they would not stop, thinking how foolish they were -- how could he save them if they would not even stay to be wounded in the attack? Fools! he thought bitterly. How rude they all were!

As Major Spenser reached the back door, he could hear, between the deafening mortar blasts, the thumping of feet in the emergency hallway and the alarmed shouts of the men
inside. Glimpses of the AMA Journal article typed themselves in his head, flashing like ticker-tape. He fumbled for his key but dropped it in his excitement. The article wrote and erased itself in great flashes as he searched frantically on his hands and knees for the key. One more door, he thought in panic, one more door. The thumping of feet grew louder. The great blasts of the mortars came closer. Suddenly, he found it! Major Spenser stood up with key and joyfully put it in the lock.

A brilliant flash rocked his head as a mortar round threw Major Spenser high in the air, tumbling him over and over like a rag doll with a cloud of dust and gunpowder before dropping him unceremoniously on the broken, hot ground.

As Major Spenser lay unconscious and bleeding on the ground, the bandaged soldiers hobbled by like ghosts, seeking the shelter of the bunker.

Lieutenant St. James found himself coming painfully awake with visions of his radio men filing by with their eyes fixed on him. He felt his head throbbing and saw the radio men, mangled and bloody and bandaged, glaring at him and pointing accusing fingers. He shook his head painfully and groaned. Had he hit his head when he fainted? Where was the old man with the knife? On top of it all, overriding these diversions, came the terrible visions of the RTO's.
"Oh my God," he moaned. He wished with all his heart he had never regained consciousness. He lifted his head as high as he could and banged it repeatedly on the floor, hoping to lapse back into blessed, forgetful unconsciousness. After a minute or so of excruciating pounding, the pain became unbearable, and Lieutenant St. James had to stop. He turned his head to either side and cursed his fate — to be doomed to wander conscious and guilty all his life.

"No! No! No!" he groaned. It was too much for one man to bear. If only the chaplain were alive! Staggering to his feet, he made his way to the door.

Suddenly, a mortar round landed in front of the small building. The explosion blew Lieutenant St. James back into the room. He saw lights flashing as he tried to focus. Oh my God! he thought, terrified. The day! The day was here! In his hysteria, Lieutenant St. James remembered from his childhood the terrible tales of the day the Messiah had died on the cross, tales of the sky going black and the earth opening up with fierce rumblings. Another explosion rocked the building. Lieutenant St. James's mind whirled. Debris tumbled down around him, and he was terrified.

"Oh God, oh God!" he cried out. The chaplain was dead and the last day was at hand! Lieutenant St. James cried for his soul — what chance did he have? Already a murderer, he had taken a man of God into battle and to his death! He was damned! Countless Popes would take his name in vain forever!
"Oh Lord, have mercy on my soul!" Lieutenant St. James sobbed and crawled painfully to the door. He lifted his eyes to watch the world torn apart, to wait for the angels to come and find him hiding here and work him over. The world would be blown to shreds, and all the guilt lay on Lieutenant St. James's own dark, shrivelled soul. As tears streamed from his eyes, he saw between the great flashing orange and yellow explosions, a sight that froze his blood: the radio men, not in his mind but out there in the breaking world, bandaged and bleeding, running in horror across the ragged ground. Some ran, some limped and carried others, some crawled, their bandages dirty and dragging in the dirt, all of them disappearing into some hellish, gaping hole in the ground.

"Aaaaahhhhh!" Lieutenant St. James fainted with a shriek and fell into tortured unconsciousness.

One of the running patients stopped to look at Lieutenant St. James. "Hey!" he yelled to another. "Help me get this guy into the bunker!" A second bandaged patient rushed over, and the two men carried Lieutenant St. James into the bunker, barely beating a mortar round that completely demolished the building where Lieutenant St. James had lain dazed and watched the Judgment Day.
When the girls at the "airport" saw the parade of jeeps pulling out of the dark alley to surround the house, they ran half-naked out to greet the M.P.'s. The girls were used to depending on the generals and colonels who found their way into the house, or had their way found for them, and the sight of hundreds of jeeps loaded with American soldiers was a glimpse of paradise. They swarmed over the jeeps, unzipping pants and kissing ears and quoting prices.

"Damn," Senator Jefferson whispered. "I didn't expect them to surrender so easily."

The M.P. sergeant in charge turned to Senator Jefferson. "What now, Senator?" he asked tiredly, wishing midnight would come so he could go off-duty.

"We'll storm the house," Senator Jefferson said firmly. "I want that General."

"So do I," said Roxie the Donut Dolly, leaping out of the jeep. Without a backward glance, she strode up to the big house and went in.

Senator Jefferson stared in amazement. The sergeant tapped him on the arm.

"I don't really think you'll get anywhere trying to storm the place," the sergeant said, pointing behind them.

Senator Jefferson looked around. He gasped. All he could see in the glare of hundreds of headlights were naked and half-naked bodies writhing in, out, under, and on the jeeps. He looked back around quickly, blushing and outraged.
"This . . . this is . . . outrageous!" he sputtered. "Sergeant, get on your bullhorn and order the general out -- tell him he's surrounded."

The sergeant took out his bullhorn and handed it to the senator, hearing behind him the grunts and giggles. "You tell him, Senator. I don't have the heart."

Senator Jefferson took the bullhorn and turned it on. "Testing . . . testing . . . ," he said into it.

"Testing . . . testing . . . ," he heard from behind him, followed by a roar of laughter. Soon, the air was filled with imitations yelled through cupped hands: "Testes . . . testes . . . ." Senator Jefferson tried not to listen. He took a deep breath and yelled into the bullhorn. "Come out with your . . . !"

Captain Renfro fell over the side of the jeep, holding his ears. "Oww! Oww! I'm deaf!" he shrieked, thrashing about on the ground.

"Sorry, Captain . . . ," Senator Jefferson mumbled. He had held the megaphone inches from the ear of Captain Renfro, who had been too busy watching the M.P.'s cavort with the girls to notice. He lay on the ground and groaned.


"I can't! I can't! I'm deaf!"

"Oh, for . . . Jesus, Renfro," Major Pearson turned away disgustedly.

The sergeant nudged Senator Jefferson. "Senator, some-
body's going to have to go in. Now, if you'd like, you can
talk to my men about . . . ."

Senator Jefferson heard the ecstatic moans and giggles
behind him. He flinched. "Give me your pistol," he said in
desperation. "I'll go in." Senator Jefferson was desperate
enough, in fact, to lay his life on the line, to meet this
mass murderer in a showdown -- because he knew his own life
would be a joke if he didn't bring back the general. This
was the moment of truth.

The sergeant shook his head and yawned and gave the
senator his pistol.

"Need any help?" Major Pearson volunteered, remembering
vividly being left for dead by General Rush. He realized
that there was little chance the general would ever be suc-
cessfully court-martialled. There was really only one way
. . . "How about getting another pistol, Sergeant, and I'll
go in with the senator?" There was only one sure way to
get a general, Major Pearson decided. "All right, Senator?"

Senator Jefferson was more than a little relieved to
have someone accompany him. "If you wish, Major," he said
coolly.

The sergeant muttered and shook his head. He got out
of the jeep and came back in a moment with a .45 automatic
he had borrowed from one of his men. He handed it to Major
Pearson.

"What about the handcuffs?" Major Pearson asked, holding
the gun awkwardly in both hands.
Senator Jefferson blushed. "I, uh, I don't have the, uh, the keys with me . . . I, uh, left them back at . . . uh . . . ."

"Oh, Good Lord," Major Pearson muttered. He got out of the jeep and almost tripped over Captain Renfro, who sat on the ground still tugging at his ear. "You want to go, Renfro?" he asked, pointing at the big house.

Captain Renfro paled visibly. "Pardon?" he said, cupping his ear. "Pardon?"

"Still deaf?" Major Pearson asked.

Captain Renfro nodded vigorously and went on tugging his ear.

"Come on, Senator," Major Pearson said. He started toward the old house, fingerering the pistol he hoped would bring justice into a corrupt world.

Senator Jefferson took a deep breath and got out of the jeep. He gripped the pistol firmly, trying to hold on to it with his sweaty hand. Holding his breath, he followed Major Pearson. He felt, in the glare of the headlights, that he was walking toward his destiny. Before the night was over, he would have his measure of fame and fortune, his slice of the pie -- or he would go down fighting, go down in glorious flames. This last idea didn't appeal to Senator Jefferson -- he recalled his dream of being shot down. He shook his head to chase away the thought, threw back his shoulders, and marched on, determined to reach the big house before his knees buckled.
Major Pearson decided as he waited for Senator Jefferson that he would shoot General Rush right between the eyes.

Colonel Majeskie sighed as he sat on the bed. He looked around him -- the room was furnished in old French style. He sighed again. It was time to make his decision: security or recognition, the desk or the medal. No guts, no glory, he decided sadly and stood up.

Major Dyke would have the desk, the beautiful armored fortress that had so long guarded Colonel Majeskie from the hidden sniper outside his office window. Colonel Majeskie shook his head to fight off the vision of the grinning sniper edging toward the office window, cheered on by the bare-breasted laundry girls.

He smacked his fist into the bed. By God, it was worth it! By God, Colonel Majeskie realized, he had never had a medal, except Private Bing's, and this would be his last chance to get one. It was now or never. Colonel Majeskie's spirits began to soar. He hadn't felt this brave since he'd flown over Rong Song. He was bolstered on by the sparkling vision of himself walking with the President on the Presidential beach, watching the President's bubbly daughter turning cartwheels in the surf.

Yes! Yes, he decided, he would give up everything to have the medal!
Colonel Majeskie strode proudly to the door and opened it. He felt as if he were opening it onto a new life. He took a deep breath of the heavily-perfumed air in the hall and stepped through the door onto the plushly-carpeted hallway.

"There he is!"

Colonel Majeskie dove terrified back into the room as bullets ripped into the door behind him. Quickly, he scrambled to the door and locked it. He lay on the floor panting. The sniper! My God, he had only to think of giving up the desk, and the sniper had found him. He heard through the window the whores giggling in the jeeps below and saw in his mind the big-teated laundry girls laughing across the ditch. Wildly, Colonel Majeskie looked around for an escape. The window! He heard shouts and footsteps on the stairs, coming for him. The window was his only hope!

His heart pounding out of control, Colonel Majeskie crawled toward the window. Scenes flashed in his mind of the President saluting a flag-draped coffin, while his veiled young daughter turned cartwheels across the funeral parlor.

Suddenly, the footsteps were at the door. Colonel Majeskie heard bodies banging against the door. With a scream, he jumped to his feet and leaped head-first out the second-story window, hearing shots following him into the air.
"I think I winged him," Major Pearson said. He looked out the window but saw nothing but the empty yard and some hedges and bushes. Almost all the jeeps had gone, and it was quite dark.

Senator Jefferson was worried and upset. "You shouldn't have shot," he said. "I want him alive." He imagined dragging General Rush's bullet-ridden corpse before the Senate and declaring, "Here is the murderer!" Someone would call from the Senate floor, "Looks more like the victim!" Senator Jefferson closed his eyes and heard his wife chuckling, "Oh Wayland." He opened his eyes quickly and looked at Major Pearson.

"Major," he said, "I hope, for your sake, he's alive . . . ."

Major Pearson was hanging out the window, trying to spot the body. Senator Jefferson cleared his throat loudly.

"Ahem! Major, did you hear me?"

"Damn!" Major Pearson pulled his head back into the room. "It looks like he got away." He walked quickly to the door. "Come on, let's go find the sonofabitch." He disappeared into the hall.

Senator Jefferson stood still a moment, wondering where his authority had gone. He sighed and, deciding that where General Rush had gone was more important, followed Major Pearson, dragging his heavy hopes behind him.
Major "Bull" Dyke heard the jeeps pulling up outside. He smiled and sat down in the parlor to wait for the M.P.'s. All around him on the big polished marble table and the gleaming ebony end tables were dozens of unopened bottles of Jack Daniels whiskey and Chivas Regal 12-year-old Scotch. Major Dyke had also set out his best crystal and big china plates of exotic hors d'ouvres— he was ready for the M.P.'s, ready for his Liberation.

He had waited a long time for this moment. From the day the three little men in the alley had confronted Major Dyke many months ago, and he had reluctantly bought the big house, he had been little more than a well-paid prisoner, unable to leave but growing rich.

Now, thought Major Dyke, sipping his whiskey, now the pay-off begins. Within minutes the M.P.'s would charge into the house and announce the raid. Major Dyke thought of the money, almost a half-million dollars, stuffed away in a very secret place. He smiled and leaned back to listen to the commotion outside. The M.P.'s, he figured, would take him to jail, where he would lounge comfortably on promises of making them all rich. Probably only a few months he would be detained. Then, following a dishonorable discharge from the army, would come the real pay-off. Major Dyke grabbed his genitals. "Godamighty," he whispered ecstatically. "Good Godamighty damn!"
He thought of how easy it would be to send back for the money, and he thought of the beautiful young American girls a half-million dollars would buy — all the ripe young luscious girls lying naked on clean white sheets, whispering and moaning his name. Major Dyke clutched his crotch with both hands and decided he'd give all the money right now for just one. "Oooooh," he groaned.

"Where is he?"

Major Dyke looked up. He tossed his drink high into the air and blinked his eyes a dozen times. He couldn't believe it!

"Where is he, I said." Roxie the Donut Dolly stood before the gaping major, hands on hips.

"Wh-wh-wh-wh-who?" Major Dyke could scarcely speak. Drool poured down his chin. His tongue thickened and went dry.

"You know who," Roxie said impatiently, looking around the room. "General Rush."

Major Dyke never heard the name as he undressed the well-built young luscious American girl in his mind. He had her down to bra and bikini panties when she turned and walked huffily out of the room. "I'll find him myself," she sniffed.

Major Dyke watched her buttocks churning seductively under the tight dress. He leaned his head back. The room whirled. Where had she come from? He grabbed himself and groaned. He knew he couldn't wait any longer — he had to have her! He had thought he could wait the few months in
jail, then send back for the money . . . but, now, he had seen one, and he had to have it . . . he couldn't wait. His whole abdomen seemed about to burst.

With a great athletic leap, Major Dyke was out of the chair and across the room. "Miss! Miss!" he yelled frantically. "Where are you? You can have everything! You can have it all!" Like a madman, Major Dyke scurried through the front hall, opening doors and yelling. "Miss! Miss! Where are you?"

When Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher awoke in the nurses' quarters, lying on a hospital operating cart in a dressing gown, he heard muffled explosions and saw women scurrying about him in their underclothes. He closed his eyes, certain that he was in hell, and these temptations of the flesh were his eternal torture for transgressing in Saigon. When he dared open them again, he noticed, to his surprise, that some of the women had on nurses' uniforms. How strange, he thought -- one would never expect nurses to end up here.

"Come on!" one of them yelled. "Let's get the chaplain out of here!"

Sputtering half-hearted, frightened protests, Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher was wheeled out the door and into the yard. For the first time, he noticed his operating gown. He gasped and pulled it down to cover himself as he was bumped along.
The last thing he remembered was lying on a bed, exhausted after switching places with Private Bing. His ankle hurt. He couldn't figure out now where he was or why he was on a hospital cart. He couldn't help noticing the bright explosions ripping up the yard on all sides, but he couldn't piece together what was happening or why his ankle hurt so badly. All he knew was that he was half-naked on a cart being pushed by half-naked women through a chaos of explosions. He closed his eyes, wondering in horror what the women had in mind for him. The explosions rang in his ears.

The night air revived Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher's mental faculties after a few moments, and he saw that he was being taken inside a dark cave. Once inside, the explosions became muffled again, and he was soon aware of a large number of people in the cave with him. He saw dozens of orange, glowing cigarette butts and heard the buzzing of the people.

"Wh-where am I?" he asked a figure next to him, almost afraid of the answer.

"You're safe now, Chaplain," the voice said. It was one of the voices that had pushed him into the cave.

With a rush, the voice was all over him. "Chaplain! Oh my God, you're alive!" Lieutenant St. James threw himself over the chaplain's legs and sobbed.

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher looked around in the dark. It seemed that all the cigarette butts were pointed at him. He was embarrassed at the fuss Lieutenant St. James was making. He tried to calm the broken man.

"Now, now, take it easy --" He paused. Suddenly, he realized that he still didn't know where he was. He looked around in the dark at the cigarette butts. Were they cigarette butts? Had he been taken prisoner? Were the glowing spots of orange really the tips of hot pokers, ready to pierce and burn his body? Were these Viet Cong? Is that why Lieutenant St. James had feared he was dead? And was the lieutenant a prisoner, too?

"Where am I?" he asked nervously.

"You're here . . . you're here," Lieutenant St. James sobbed happily. "Oh thank God, you're here!"

"Where is here?" the chaplain asked impatiently.

A nurse patted him on the arm. "You're in a bunker, Chaplain. The hospital is under mortar attack."

"Mortar . . . ?" the chaplain began. A lot of things fit together now. Especially why Lieutenant St. James had been so worried about him. "Dear boy," he murmured and patted the lieutenant gently on the head. But he still couldn't understand why he had been in the nurses' quarters.
Ah, but the Lord, he knew, works in strange ways — perhaps his being mysteriously with the nurses had saved his life, so who was he to question the Lord God?

"I am yours to command," Lieutenant St. James was saying. Even in the dark, the chaplain could see the big loyal puppy eyes blinking at him. He patted the lieutenant again, who said very deliberately and solemnly, "I am your servant. You have delivered me out of the hands of sin. You have washed away the guilty blood of my sins and have washed me in the holy waters of heaven. I am your servant." He kissed the chaplain's seminary class ring, cherishing the contact with so holy a man. For Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher, he felt, had proven at last by his survival, that Lieutenant St. James was not guilty of killing and maiming the radio operators. It had been a test, and he had passed — thanks to the chaplain. He would follow the blessed man to the ends of the earth.

"I will become a minister," he said in the dark. "Teach me the ways of God."

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher was becoming very embarrassed. He heard the voices mumbling around him in the dark and knew they were talking about him. He began to fear they would all think he was some sort of fanatic. He tried to hush the lieutenant. "Shhh . . . not so loud, Lieutenant . . . shhh . . . ."

Suddenly a huge explosion rocked the ground above them
and sent clouds of dirt sifting through the stuffy bunker.

"Hey," someone said. "That's not a mortar -- that's a rocket!"

"Why the hell didn't they build this thing stronger?" another voice asked nervously.

"You know why -- Major Spenser. You'd think the sonofabitch wanted everybody dead. Hell, other hospitals are built like bunkers themselves. You don't have to go running right out across the open." There were grumblings of agreement.

Another round landed on top of the bunker. The timbers inside shook and groaned.

"That sonofabitch Spenser," a voice said, scared.

"Don't worry," Lieutenant St. James piped up. "The chaplain will save us." He turned to the chaplain. "I am your servant," he said reverently.

"Go screw yourself," an angry voice muttered.

A third round whistled in and sent huge, choking clouds of dust swirling through the bunker. Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher found himself surrounded by dozens of dark figures, all kneeling around his cart.

"I'm your servant, too, Chaplain," a voice cried out.

"So am I," another said. Others joined in.

"Me, too,"

"Amen!" "Convert me, convert me!"
The chaplain was confused. He didn't think he had the authority to convert the multitudes. He wasn't even sure if his jurisdiction covered the Medical Corps at all -- it might just be good for the infantry.

A fourth round pounded down deafeningly, and the whole bunker shook as if it would collapse.

"Lord have mercy!" someone screamed.

"Help us!"

Hands reached out and touched the chaplain. He shuddered.

"Chaplain, do something!"

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher was growing frightened. What would these people do if he failed them? He saw himself crucified under a crown of thorns. He watched himself stoned to death in a rice paddy, torn to pieces in the dark bunker, under tons of earth, the hands finding him and ripping him apart. He didn't think he could stand that. He prayed for help.

"Have faith!" he cried, surprised at his own voice, shocked that the Lord had put words in his mouth that simply cast aside the fears. "Have faith!" he yelled again.

"I do! I do!" the terrified voices came back.

"Oh, I do!"

"Amen!"

"Hallelujah!"

"Pray for us, Chaplain! Pray for us!"
Another round bashed into the bunker, taking with it a great chunk that left a gaping hole for the stars and for the rest of the rockets.

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher heard wailing. He felt the hands clinging to him, almost tearing his gown off. Summoning all his faith, he cried out:

"Oh Lord, deliver us from our enemies!"

The bunker was suddenly deathly quiet. The chaplain's words hung in the dusty air. No breath was exhaled, as the people waited silently for the next round. After almost a minute, the sound came. Somewhere far-off, far away from the bunker, somewhere far away on the other side of the hospital, a dull thud sounded. After that, there was silence.

At least a minute passed before a word was said in the bunker. "You did it, Chaplain," Lieutenant St. James whispered. The word spread -- the emotion, the spirit, spread like a fever. "He did it!" "The chaplain did it!" "Hallelujah!" "Praise the chaplain!" The bunker was filled with grateful, hysterical shouts.

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher found himself being carried aloft, like a triumphant football coach, out of the bunker. In the still night air, strips of smoke drifted vacantly and disappeared. The smell of gunpowder stung the air. The chaplain listened to the shouts beneath him and felt the glory of his calling. He was carried on thankful shoulders across the scarred ground toward the hospital. The cheers
almost deafened him. He wished it were daytime, so God could see him — how proud He would be!

Suddenly, the chaplain felt himself being rudely dumped on the ground. The young doctor's voice cut through the merriment like a scalpel through infection. "Major Spenser has been wounded. There are many casualties and much work to be done!" The nurses and orderlies rushed away toward the hospital.

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher sat dazed on the ground. Only Lieutenant St. James remained beside him. The chaplain felt dejected. He began to doubt whether all those people had really been converted. "Fair weather Christians," he muttered, not at all certain if he had used the term right and not caring. How quickly they forget, he thought somewhat bitterly.

"Chaplain, perhaps you could help, too."

The chaplain looked up. The young doctor was standing over him. "There are a lot of wounded men. You may be needed."

The chaplain stood up, brushing himself off. "Yes, of course," he said, a little embarrassed to be found sitting on the ground in his dressing gown. The young doctor nodded and left. "Yes," the chaplain said again. "Yes, I am needed." He said it to re-assure himself, and it did. "Yes, yes, yes, I am needed." He felt the spirit pulsing through his arteries. He turned to Lieutenant St. James. "Lieutenant,"
he said solemnly, "You say you want to be a man of God -- now is the time to learn how." He felt his power growing again.

Lieutenant St. James nodded reverently. "You are my salvation. I will follow you."

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher didn't even blush at being called somebody's "salvation" -- he rather liked the sound of it. Feeling every inch a man of the Cloth, the chaplain struck out across the torn ground to give comfort and aid to the wounded. It had been a miraculous night, and he wondered what it still held in store for him. God will have His way, he decided and felt like whistling.

Lieutenant St. James trailed behind, his eyes glazed in a near-trance, following in the literal footsteps of his savior and master.

"I surrender," a voice came out of the darkness.

The M.P. sergeant, who was sitting gloomily in his jeep, waiting for the senator to get back, looked up. A tall, crewcut blond American man in a silk kimona walked towards him on shaky legs. Arriving at the jeep, the man slumped against the front fender. His kimona fell open -- he was naked underneath. A huge, contented, almost comical smile split his face horizontally, so wide that it made his lower jaw seem hinged like a puppet's. He looked exhausted.
"Who the hell are you?" the sergeant asked, wishing he could go off-duty. All his men had disappeared into the night with the whores -- he felt foolish sitting in front of a whorehouse with three hand-cuffed officers in the back seat.

"I'm . . . I'm . . . ," Major Dyke giggled. "Whewie! I'm tired!" He collapsed on the hood, smiling, his kimona flopping open.

The sergeant was getting angry. He got out and shook Major Dyke. He was damned tired of weirdos for one night. "Who are you? What in hell are you surrendering for?"

Major Dyke smiled at the sergeant. "Whewie . . . I give up."

The sergeant scowled and went back to sit in the jeep. "Jesus," he muttered, wondering if he would ever get to bed. "Jesus." He glanced up and saw Senator Jefferson and Major Pearson coming across the wide yard. "Thank God," he said and started the jeep.

"Now how about taking these fuckin' handcuffs off me?" Lieutenant Colonel Burnside growled from the backseat.

"I still didn't do nothing," Captain Renfro mumbled, his head withdrawn almost to his shoulders.

Major Virelli snored, having fallen sound asleep earlier.

"Shut up, Renfro," Major Pearson said grumpily. He climbed in the back of the jeep and made Captain Renfro sit on the floor. Senator Jefferson got in the front. Both the
major and the senator sat silently and gloomily as the sergeant turned the jeep around to leave.

"Help! Help!"

A figure bounded darkly across the yard toward them.

"Wait a minute, Sergeant," Senator Jefferson said.

The sergeant stopped the jeep. He slapped the steering wheel angrily. "I knew it," he muttered.

"It's Majeskie!" Lieutenant Colonel Burnside announced from the back seat. "There's your man, Senator!"

"Bullshit," Major Pearson said, disappointed that General Rush had gotten away. Majeskie was a small fish compared to General Rush. "Bullshit," he said again, for emphasis.

Colonel Majeskie came up to the jeep and stood panting and wild-eyed. "You...you...you've got to...help me...the...the sniper..."

"What happened to you?" Major Pearson asked, angry that Colonel Majeskie had shown up instead of General Rush, who must have gotten away somehow after jumping out the window. "You look like hell," he said angrily. Colonel Majeskie's fatigues were badly ripped, and there were scratches and bruises on his face and hands.

"I...I...fell into a hedge..." Colonel Majeskie panted, still trying to catch his breath. "I had...to jump...the sniper..." He looked from face to face frantically. "You've got to help me!" He noticed Major Dyke leaning against the jeep grinning, his eyes closed. "Bull, Bull! You've got to help me! You can
have the desk! Just get me out of here! I don't care about the medal!"

"Medal?" Senator Jefferson stared at Colonel Majeskie. "You! You're the one!" He remembered now who Majeskie was. Perhaps he could be a help in finding the general.

"That's the stuff, Senator," Lieutenant Colonel Burnside said. "That's your man. Now, how about these . . . ?" He held up his handcuffed wrists.

"Arrest this man, Sergeant!" Senator Jefferson commanded.

"All right, all right!" the sergeant replied, getting very irritated with the whole lot of them. "Get in, Colonel," he said shortly to Colonel Majeskie, who piled happily into the backseat and lay huddled on the floor next to Captain Renfro. The sergeant turned to Senator Jefferson. "Anybody else you want to arrest?"

"General Rush," Major Pearson said. "Majeskie was just a tool."

"Like hell," Lieutenant Colonel Burnside snorted. "You've got your man, Senator."

"What about that one?" the sergeant said wearily, pointing to Major Dyke, who was sitting on the hood of the jeep, smiling tiredly.

"Say, he looks familiar . . . ," Major Pearson said.

"No!" Senator Jefferson declared, tired of the complications. "Colonel Majeskie's the man I want. He'll tell us where General Rush is."
"Good thinking, Senator," Major Pearson said, seeing an outside chance still open to shoot General Rush.

"Crap," Lieutenant Colonel Burnside muttered.

Captain Renfro poked his head up. "Well, it's sure not me you want."

"Oh shut up," Major Pearson said.

"Drive!" Senator Jefferson commanded. The M.P. sergeant gunned the engine, put the jeep in gear, and drove off in a cloud of dust, leaving Major Dyke sprawled on the ground, his kimonas wide open.

"Cover yourself, Major. I'm running a high-classed place here."

Major Dyke looked up and grinned. Roxie the Donut Dolly, or rather the former Donut Dolly, stood over him, her legs apart.

"And stop looking up my skirt."

She looked around in the dark.

"Now, Major, we have a lot of work to do here. I have some new ideas." She looked at him pointedly. "And remember -- you may stay on as my personal assistant only so long as you are able to prove yourself worthy. And your salary will be commensurate with your skills." She smiled seductively. "Which I trust will improve in time."

Major Dyke lay his head back and grinned broadly. He felt the dirt on his head and saw the sharp little cold lights of the stars. It was worth it, he decided, the
whole half-million. He closed his eyes and sighed, caressing Roxie's well-turned ankle.

All through the night, Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher comforted the wounded men and said prayers for the dying. Towards dawn, he was giving pointers to Lieutenant St. James, who trailed faithfully behind him.

"Now, you see this man, Lieutenant?" he said, pointing to a seriously-wounded amputee, whose one remaining leg had been shattered in the attack. "He needs a strong prayer. That one over there, on the other hand" -- he pointed to a bandaged patient hobbling toward them up the hallway -- "he can get by with a soothing word of comfort. Watch." The chaplain waited until the man was almost to them, then smiled. "You have served your country well, young man."

"Fuck you," the young man said and went into a latrine.

The chaplain blushed. "Shellshock," he whispered to Lieutenant St. James, who nodded reverently.

Suddenly, a scrawny little old Vietnamese man in a wheelchair pulled up in front of the chaplain. His head was heavily-bandaged. Only his eyes showed, and they were drooping and puffy from crying. He mumbled something in Vietnamese through his bandages.

"What did he say?" the chaplain asked.

"I don't know," Lieutenant St. James said. "Say that in English," he told the old man.
"He can't speak English," a nurse said, coming up and taking hold of the wheelchair. "No one is quite sure what he's saying. We found him outside the old storeroom. He must have been trapped out in the yard during the attack." An orderly tapped her on the shoulder and said something urgent. She turned quickly to the chaplain. "I'm needed in Emergency," she said. "Keep him here, if you will, and I'll be back for him." She smiled and went down the hall with the orderly.

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher wasn't altogether happy about being left with the old man. Although he knew it was his duty to love all mankind, he couldn't help remembering that it was one of these people who had shot him at Rong Song. But then he thought of his lesson -- of how God had used the Viet Cong to teach him the value of his life, to show him he was needed to carry on his Lord's work on earth. He looked sympathetically at the old man, who continued to mumble incoherently through his bandages.

"I'll bet I know what he wants," Lieutenant St. James said suddenly. He leaned close to the chaplain and whispered in his ear. The chaplain drew back in amazement.

"Me?" he exclaimed. "You mean me?"

Lieutenant St. James nodded. "You performed a miracle in the bunker . . . ."

"But . . . but . . . ." The chaplain felt a little dizzy. "You mean . . . just by touching?" It was awesome to contemplate.
"Why not? Jesus did it."

"Yes, but . . . ," Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher was getting embarrassed. The lieutenant had a way of working him unintentionally into tight corners. Several nurses and orderlies who had been in the bunker were gathering around. They whispered and pointed at the chaplain.

The chaplain felt sweat break out on his forehead. He wished very much at that moment that Lieutenant St. James would keep his praise to himself. Healing by touch? Oh God, he thought, have I come that far in your grace? He looked at the old man, who was crying now and mumbling into his bandages. Is it right to heal your enemies? the chaplain wondered, tortured by doubts.

"You can do it," Lieutenant St. James insisted.

Several of the nurses and orderlies began urging him on, wondering if perhaps he did have divine powers. A large crowd had gathered now. They all buzzed expectantly.

"Do it!" Lieutenant St. James whispered. "Do it!"

The hallway grew quiet, except for the old man's whispering.

"Do it, Chaplain," someone coaxed.

"He must be in awful pain," someone else said. "Look at the tears. Come on, Chaplain, do it! Touch him!"

"Heal him, Chaplain!"

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher sweated profusely. "Oh Lord," he prayed aloud, "if it be thy will . . . ." Slowly, he
reached out his hand toward the old man. The nurses and orderlies held their breaths. Lieutenant St. James prayed silently. The chaplain's hand trembled as it approached the old man's head.

Suddenly, the old man burst into hysterical tears and pulled a knife out of his ragged pants and held it to his throat.

The chaplain jumped back with a gasp.

"He's got a knife!" someone yelled. "Look out!"

The nurses screamed and scattered. Two of the orderlies pulled the old man out of the wheelchair and wrestled the knife away. Someone brought out handcuffs, and they twisted the old man's arms behind him and clamped the cuffs on him. He moaned and mumbled as he was dragged off down the hall.

Slowly, the nurses and orderlies dispersed, talking in little groups and shaking their heads.

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher stood frozen in the hall, Lieutenant St. James patted him gently on the shoulder. "You could have done it," he said softly. The chaplain found a chair and sat down. He felt weak. He realized in horror that he had almost been murdered — and just when he had been about to heal the man. Maybe it was God's way of telling him not to fool around. "Forgive my presumption, Father," he prayed.

An orderly came down the hall and stopped.

"Well, we got him on a chopper. They'll take him up
to Saigon and interrogate him. You're lucky, Chaplain. We've had those types in here before -- pathological killers, real psychotics. You OK now?"

The chaplain nodded dumbly.

"Yeah, the funniest thing, you know," the orderly chuckled. "Jones, the other orderly, you know, well he said the old guy -- Jones speaks Vietnamese, you know -- well he said the old guy kept saying something about all of us being murderers, and there he was, pulling a knife on us!" He laughed and shook his head. "Boy, these gooks are some odd ducks." He chuckled and walked away.

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher sat in his chair shaking. God, he felt, was testing him entirely too often. How could he serve God if he was a nervous wreck? He put his hands together to keep them from trembling.

Lieutenant St. James stood beside him, looking down the hall. "Poor old fellow," he said. "I hope they go easy on the old guy."

The chaplain looked up, wondering just whose side the lieutenant was on -- God's or the Viet Cong's? Then he caught hold of himself. He must be strong. If God wanted to test him, he must endure it. He began to feel like Job, and like Job, he would endure! He stood up.

"Lieutenant," he said sternly. "We have work to do."

Lieutenant St. James nodded. "I am your servant."

"Forward, Christian Soldiers," the chaplain said proudly and started down the hall in search of needy men.
Halfway down the hall, the young doctor caught him by the arm. "Chaplain, I want you to come in here a minute. We have a man coming out of anesthesia, and he may need some comfort."

"Certainly, certainly," the chaplain said confidently. He followed the young doctor into the room, Lieutenant St. James trailing faithfully behind.

Inside the small recovery room, Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher saw the patient lying on a cot, swathed in bandages.

"He's in bad shape," the young doctor said softly.

"Who is he?" the chaplain asked cautiously, not eager to get tricked by another fanatical Viet Cong.

"Major Spenser," the young doctor said quietly. "He's the chief surgeon here. A very brave man." He turned to Sergeant Jefferies, the orderly. "I think we misjudged him." Sergeant Jefferies nodded solemnly, and the young doctor turned back to the chaplain. "We found him by the emergency exit. He had apparently tried to go back to help the more critical patients." He shook his head sadly. "A very brave man."

"Unnnghh," Major Spenser said, opening one eye slightly.

"He's coming to," the young doctor said. "I think it would be best, Chaplain, if you sat down here right beside the bed and let him see a man of God first -- it might be some comfort to him."
Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher nodded and sat down in a chair beside the bed. His eyes were misty as he thought of the surgeon's bravery. God rewards those who trust in Him, he thought. All the tests he had endured were made worthwhile in this one moment when a brave man would turn to him for comfort. The chaplain smiled benevolently and blinked back tears as he watched the poor man open his eyes.

"Aha!"

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher felt himself being pulled down. He struggled, terrified, to get free. Major Spenser had grabbed him around the neck and was holding him down on the bed. He recognized the chaplain immediately upon opening his eyes as the patient who had gotten away. Not this time, he thought deliriously. "My saw! Quick, my saw!" he yelled.

The young doctor and the orderly managed to pull the chaplain from Major Spenser's grip.

"Give him back!" the surgeon screamed. "He's the one!" Grabbing a scalpel from the tray beside him, he tried to pull himself out of bed. "He's mine!" he whispered hoarsely, "I will have him!"

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher leaned terrified against the wall as the young doctor and the orderly restrained Major Spenser and took the scalpel away.

"It's all right, Major, it's all right," the young doctor said soothingly. Major Spenser fell back on the bed, exhausted and moaning. The young doctor turned to the
Chaplain. "I guess you'd better leave, Chaplain."

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher nodded weakly and left. Lieutenant St. James tagged behind, shaking his head.

The young doctor turned to the orderly. "This may take a while for the major to get used to."

The orderly nodded. "It had to be done, Doctor. There was no other way."

"I guess so," the young doctor said. "I guess so. There wasn't much of them left anyway."

Quietly, the two left.

Later that night, Major Spenser woke up in a sweat. He had been dreaming again that the patient with the bad feet had gotten away. A nightmare. He knew he had to get up and find him before it was too late. Where was his saw? As Major Spenser stepped onto the floor, a terrible shock of pain, a flood of white explosive pain shot through his legs. He crumpled on the floor.

"My legs, my legs," he moaned. The pain was almost unbearable. He felt himself losing consciousness. He had never felt such pain.

Major Spenser fought off the fainting sensation and lifted himself to one elbow. In the dim light that filtered around the edges of the door, he could see the twin white stumps of bandages and realized that his feet had been removed.
He lay for hours sobbing on the wooden floor, wishing with all his heart he had taken his mother's advice and become a carpenter.

In the hall, Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher sat down heavily on the floor, no longer able to support himself. God, my God, he prayed, so many tests! And all for one whore! Had it been so bad? The chaplain had never really been sure whether he had done anything that night in Saigon or not. But even if he had -- was it worth the price he was paying? Shot in battle? Threatened with a knife and choked, within fifteen minutes?

He put his head in his hands. Oh Lord, he prayed, give me strength.

"What should we do now, Chaplain?" Lieutenant St. James asked, patting the chaplain gently on the head. "I am yours to command. I have so much to learn."

The chaplain looked up at the lieutenant, and a great sweeping gust of tenderness blew cool across his fevered soul. He saw the lieutenant standing there humbly, his hair mussed, his clothing rumpled, his eyes bloodshot from lack of sleep. And the boy still wanted to do God's work. Even after seeing the bitter fruits of God's labor. Oh Lord, the chaplain prayed excitedly, forgive my foolish doubting! He looked at Lieutenant St. James and saw there the dedication that God needed -- the humility, the suffering,
the incredible patience, and acceptance finally of God's hard, but just, will.

"Lieutenant," he said softly, "I will show you the way."

He felt the singular honor laid upon him, that of being chosen by God to guide this young man into Christianity.

"What way, Master?" Lieutenant St. James asked innocently, blinking his tired eyes.

"The way to God -- through ministering to your fellow man and enduring God's trials."

Lieutenant St. James was overcome. "Thank you, Chaplain," he said tearfully. "Thank you, Master."

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher stood up, feeling within him God's power renewed. "Come, my son," he said. "We still have work to do." With that, he walked down the hall, and the walls seemed made of high water, tense and trembling, walls of the sea drawn back by the hand of God. And through it, he would walk with his disciple, seeking the wounded men who needed comfort and salvation.

As Lieutenant St. James followed doggedly behind the chaplain, basking in the warm glow of the great goodness the chaplain exuded, two M.P.'s stepped out of one of the wards and grabbed him.

The chaplain was almost to the end of the hall before he turned around. "Lieutenant, I want you to know . . ."

He looked around him and down the hall. "Lieutenant?"
Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher found himself standing alone at the end of the hall.

"We have ways of making you talk, Colonel," Senator Jefferson said as evilly as he could. He paced up and down in the big main room at the M.P. station. Lieutenant Colonel Burnside, Major Pearson, Captain Renfro, and Major Virelli were all locked in a large cell that faced into the room. Lieutenant Colonel Burnside and Major Pearson glared out of the bars. Captain Renfro whimpered in a corner. Major Virelli snored on a bunk. Colonel Majeskie sat on a wooden stool in the middle of the big room, blinking into the harsh light the short agent was shining in his face like a photographer trying to light up a dark scene with his floodlight.

"What about my medal?" Colonel Majeskie asked, shading his eyes. He remembered this man, who now called himself a senator, as the Awards and Decorations man who had come to see him about the medal. That he was now a senator seemed to Colonel Majeskie an added reason he should be able to procure a medal for whoever he wanted to.

Senator Jefferson tried to control his temper. "God-damnit! If you say another word about a medal ... !" He turned away and gritted his teeth. After a moment, he faced the colonel again, feeling calmer. "Look, Majeskie," he said. "It's not you we want -- it's General Rush. Don't you understand that?"
Colonel Majeskie looked down at his feet sadly. He understood, all right. But he couldn't see the justice of it. General Rush hadn't done anything brave at Rong Song. He hadn't led the troops or flown courageously above the raging battle. Colonel Majeskie blinked back the tears. The one time in his life when he had a real chance to win a real medal . . . and they wanted to give it to General Rush. He shook his head sadly. He had served the army long and faithfully -- and now the army was spitting in his face. Colonel Majeskie felt awful -- he didn't like to have to beg for his medal.

"Please," he moaned. "Please, please, please, please -- I want my medal."

Senator Jefferson paced the room. He heard the senatorial chuckles and tried to imagine dragging Colonel Majeskie before them. It would never work. They would scream for a general, for a ruthless, cold-blooded, mass-murdering general. "Oh Wayland," his wife giggled somewhere faraway.

Senator Jefferson felt a chill and shuddered. He turned to Colonel Majeskie. "Now look, Majeskie, I'm through being nice . . . ."


After some hesitation, Senator Jefferson turned again to Colonel Majeskie and cleared his throat noisily. "All
right, Colonel, because I'm a reasonable man . . . . " He paused for effect. "If you tell us where to find General Rush, I'll see that you get your medal."

Colonel Majeskie was on his feet. "You mean . . . ? You mean . . . ?" He couldn't believe it! Visions flashed in his mind of riding in the President's limousine in a massive ticker-tape parade, while the President's acrobatic young daughter turned happy cartwheels in the street.

"Is it a deal, Colonel?" Senator Jefferson asked anxiously.

"Yes!" Colonel Majeskie said excitedly. "Yes! Oh, yes!"

"Good! Good!" Senator Jefferson clapped his hands. He heard two hundred hands clapping and his wife affectionately murmuring, "Oh Wayland."

"Now get these goddamned things off me!" Lieutenant Colonel Burnside yelled from the big cell.

"I told you I didn't do anything!" Captain Renfro called gleefully.

"Shut up, Renfro," Major Pearson said quickly. He leaned close against the bars, waiting to hear where General Rush was.

Major Virelli lay in the corner of the cell mumbling in his sleep.

"Silence! Silence!" Senator Jefferson proclaimed, waving his arms in the air. He looked around magnificently,
a huge smile erasing all the recent anxiety. "Gentlemen, let us have silence." He turned to Colonel Majeskie, who sat on his stool smiling inwardly at the images that frolicked there.

"Colonel, we are ready for your statement."

"Goddamn right!" Lieutenant Colonel Burnside yelled, banging his handcuffs against the bars.

"I want to go home!" Captain Renfro squealed happily.

"Shut up, goddamnit!" Major Pearson said, leaning closer to find out where General Rush was. He fully intended to shoot the bastard right between the eyes when he found him. "Shhh," he said to Captain Renfro.

"We are ready, Colonel," Senator Jefferson urged.

Colonel Majeskie looked up blissfully.

"All right now, Colonel, where is General Rush?"

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, Colonel Majeskie's smile began to droop. Gradually, the corners of his mouth gave way and let go their hold on the smile.

Simultaneously, Senator Jefferson's face began to mirror the colonel's. The wide smile crumbled. Both men looked at each other with solemn faces.

"Colonel?" Senator Jefferson squeaked into the great silence of the room. "Colonel . . . where is General Rush?"

Colonel Majeskie looked up with big puppy eyes.

"I don't know."

The noise was deafening. Curses from the cell drowned out the senator's own scream.
"You don't know? You don't know?" Senator Jefferson turned around and around in the middle of the room, his eyes on the ceiling fan, his mind thousands of miles away, as he heard himself laughed out of the Senate. "Lock him up! Lock him up!" he yelled.

Colonel Majeskie was led into the cell, where he was immediately swarmed by Major Pearson and Lieutenant Colonel Burnside, who beat him to the floor and began jumping on him. Even Captain Renfro edged in and kicked, then retreated to a corner to whimper.

"What now, Senator?" the tall agent asked.

Senator Jefferson looked at the agent with empty eyes. His face had fallen until bags poohched out under his glazed eyes and his cheeks sagged around his mouth. He felt his hair turning white and brittle. He saw himself whittling wood on a bench in front of the courthouse, surrounded by other nodding old men who had been, like himself, put out to pasture.

"I'm going into the backroom and lie down," he said tiredly.

The two agents looked at each other and sensed that their job was over. They sighed and left.

"Thank God," the M.P. sergeant muttered, glad that it was over for the night, and he could go off-duty and get some sleep. He yawned. It had been a long night.
General Rush sat at the little outdoor table and sipped a warm coke. "Goddamn Japs," he mumbled, certain that the Coke had been stolen from the PX. He sipped it grudgingly.

General Rush sighed heavily. His feet hurt. His stomach hurt, too, not so much from hunger as from the beginnings of an ulcer -- without Major Hartley around, combined with the stress of having seen and yelled at him, the general's stomach ached and churned. He needed to yell at Hartley, and there was no trace of Hartley.

For two days, General Rush had yelled at Vietnamese merchants and peasants as he wandered the dirty little streets of Saigon. He had been unable to find the big M.P. station, and yelling at the natives had done nothing except make his stomach hurt and his throat sore.

Damn! he thought. How he would love to see Hartley! Just the few minutes he had seen him, decked out in a kimona in the whorehouse, had done wonders for him. His stomach had felt better and his hoarseness had cleared up immediately. Now his throat and stomach hurt.

"You want more Coke, GI?" an old lady asked, grinning through black, broken teeth and holding a Coke.

General Rush looked at the old woman and thought of how badly he hated the Vietnamese. They never brushed their teeth, they stank, they picked their asses in public, and they couldn't even talk English. They were a nasty, inferior
race, and General Rush hated them. He snatched the Coke away from the old lady. "Damn Jap," he muttered.

The old lady wrinkled her face up. She held out her hand. "You pay me one dollah, GI," she told him sternly.

General Rush glared tiredly at the old lady and reached his boot out from under the table and kicked her hard on the knee. She doubled up and fell to the ground, groaning in pain. Several other old women gathered around and scolded General Rush but scattered quickly when he drew his pistol.

General Rush put his .45 back in its holster and took his Coke and walked out into the little market square. Hundreds of wooden carts were set up in the dusty square, and the natives hawked fruit and meat in shrill, chattery voices, like squirrels arguing. Flies buzzed in dark swarms around the carts. The sun beat down mercilessly and spoiled the meat and softened the fruit. The old women and children tending the carts waved their hands lazily at the flies.

General Rush shook his head disgustedly as he wandered through the square, idly picking up pieces of fruit, shuddering and putting them into his pockets. Goddamned foul race, he thought as he picked his way among the carts. He hardly noticed the clamor arising behind him as the people began to realize he wasn't going to pay for the things he was picking up.

General Rush suddenly felt a hand in his pocket. He grabbed the hand and jerked it out. He was surprised to
see a crowd had gathered behind him. He let go of the hand, which belonged to a young boy with a gold tooth. Immediately, the boy tried to put his hand back in the general's pocket. General Rush, not knowing whether the boy was a pervert or a pickpocket, but despising both, and Vietnamese no matter what they were, kicked the boy in the stomach.

The crowd roared angrily and moved toward General Rush, pointing at the fallen boy and at General Rush's bulging pockets.

General Rush glared at the people. He despised them for their attitude toward Americans, who fed them, clothed them, and fought for them. "Ungrateful Jap bastards!" he yelled, pulling his pistol and pointing it at the crowd.

With screams of fear, the people scattered.

General Rush fired several shots at them but wasn't certain if he had hit anyone, since a number of old ladies and very small children were falling anyway under the trampling feet of the panic-stricken people. General Rush remembered the human wave attacks thrown at him in Korea. Damned chickenshit Japs, he had thought then and still thought.

When the square was empty, General Rush put his pistol back in its holster and picked up an apple from a deserted cart. He frowned at it and put it in his pocket. "Thieving Japs," he muttered, seeing the bottles of Coke lined up along one cart. With a sweep of his arm, he cleared the cart, and the bottles fell all over one another in the dust.
of the square, some breaking, others rolling away, half-buried in the dust.

General Rush looked around. A dozen dark alleys opened off the square, each yawning at him forbiddingly, each offering to guide him deeper and deeper into the bowels of the inscrutable East.

"Pssst. Hey, GI. Pssst." A voice came hissing suddenly out of the shadows of one alley. "Over here, GI."

General Rush drew his pistol and walked toward the voice, prepared to shoot the bastard between the eyes.

"You need help, GI. Those people mad. I take you to airport."

"Help?" General Rush scoffed, trying to see the person whose voice lurked in the alley. "I don't need any goddamn . . . ." He stopped. "Airport?" he said to himself, remembering that was where Major Hartley had been.

"Sure," the voice said in broken English. "Airport. I take you to airport."

General Rush started to follow the voice into the alley, then stopped, remembering the boy with bad teeth. "Say, you're the bastard that stole my jeep, aren't you?"

"Oh no," the voice said, scared, "I'm not that bastard."

General Rush grabbed at the voice and caught hold of a shirt.

"Help! Help!" the voice cried, terrified.

General Rush suddenly felt a body land on his back. Fists began pounding his head. He let go of the shirt and
heard footsteps running away down the alley.

"Hey!" he yelled, suddenly aware that the body was still on his back, slugging at his ears and neck. "Get your Jap ass off me!"

The body clung tight. The fists hammered away. General Rush pulled out his pistol and banged it where he thought the body's head should be. It hit something hard and he heard a groan. The body fell off and lay in a slump in the alley.

General Rush grabbed a leg and hauled the body into the light at the other end of the alley and dropped it. It was lying face down. General Rush levelled his pistol at the back of the head. Then he paused. There was a bald spot on the back of the head. His eyes roamed over the silk kimono. Quickly, he turned the body over.

"Hartley!" General Rush scowled at the unconscious man. "Hartley, you sonofabitch! What the hell are you doing jumping on my back?" For ten full minutes, General Rush stood over the inert form, yelling and stomping out the frustrations of the past month. A warm feeling began to spread over the general. By God, his throat felt fine. His stomach gurgled pleasantly. It was good to have Hartley back, the worthless sonofabitch. General Rush picked up Major Hartley and walked out of the alley with the major over his shoulder.

The people had gathered in the square again, but General Rush, wanting to avoid trouble, scattered them with
two shots. As he turned to search for the M.P. station, a
jeep drove up, filled with Military Police.

"Where's the disturbance?" the driver asked General
Rush. "We got a call there was a drunk GI doing some tar-
get practice over here."

"Horseshit," General Rush growled amiably. "I was here
all the time. I need a ride."

"Sorry, sir," the driver said, looking over his shoulder
to the backseat. "We're full."

General Rush pointed at two of the M.P.'s in the back-
seat. "You, you. Out." The two soldiers reluctantly got
out, grumbling.

"Now you're not full," General Rush said, climbing into
the jeep. He set Major Hartley down beside him and looked
at the two M.P.'s he had disposed. "You boys can get started
looking for that damned drunk GI." He tapped the driver on
the shoulder.

"Let's go," he said calmly. With Major Hartley back,
General Rush didn't even feel the need to yell.

The driver cursed and started the engine.

Senator Jefferson rose from the cot feeling like a
very old, very sick man. He was tired, and his back hurt.
He tried to stretch, but the popping sounds scared him, and
he stopped and sat back down on the cot. He couldn't recall
ever feeling this bone-tired before. He kept his eyes wide
open, because when he closed them he saw the wreckage of his life — the wasted years in Congress, the shattered hopes of getting the Armed Forces committee seat, the marriage of thirty-four years to a wife who had never understood him. He saw looming before him the awesome specter that was the dread military machine — a giant robot filled with obscure and complex wiring, foolproof fuses, dark and dusty corners and cracks crawling with strange vermin — a machine indestructible and cruel and terrible. Senator Jefferson buried his face in his hands. He felt like crying, but he couldn't. He was drained.

Slowly, he rose again to his feet. He would turn loose the officers and humbly apologize for the trouble he had caused them. Then he would go home and send a letter of resignation to the Senate. He would retire to a small farm somewhere in Vermont and buy some chickens and keep them half-starved, and if his wife ever once said, "Oh Wayland," he would toss her to the chickens.

Sadly, Senator Jefferson put his hand on the doorknob. Once he had turned the officers loose, it would be over. All over. He drew in what breath he could muster and opened the door.

"There he is!"

The short agent grabbed the startled senator and pulled him into the big room. "Man, I thought I'd never find you," he said excitedly. "That M.P. sergeant went home, and this
other one" — he pointed to a dozing M.P. at the desk — "he wouldn't tell me where you were . . . and . . . and . . . ." He was talking so fast he had to stop a minute. He pointed at the men in the cell. "And they wouldn't tell me, either."

Senator Jefferson looked silently at the short agent, who was dancing around the room, holding newspapers in both hands. Senator Jefferson looked at the cell, feeling very guilty.

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside stood at the bars, glaring angrily at the senator. Major Pearson sat in a corner grumbling. Captain Renfro was whimpering softly on the floor. Major Virelli snored loudly from the cot. Colonel Majeskie lay crumpled in a corner, bruised and moaning.

Senator Jefferson went to the desk where the M.P. slept soundly. He opened a drawer and took out the cell key. Just as he was going across the room to open the cell, the short agent stopped dancing and grabbed the senator's arm. "Look, Senator, look!" He held up a newspaper and grinned broadly.

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside saw the key and yelled from the cell. "Hey goddamnit!" he shouted at the short agent. "Leave him alone. Now get this sonofabitchin' cell open!" By this time, Major Pearson was up and yelling, too.

Senator Jefferson ignored the yells as he stared at the headlines in the army paper, the Stars and Stripes: "SENATOR LEADS RAID ON SAIGON'S BIGGEST HOUSE OF ILL REPUTE,
Illicit Prostitution Ring Believed Broken." Senator Jefferson shook his head slowly as he read the headline over and over. He looked up at the short agent. "How . . . what . . . ?"

The short agent grinned happily, proud to be a part of this momentous occasion. "I don't know how they found out, Senator, but" — he held up another paper — "you're famous." Senator Jefferson took the paper and read the headline: "DEMOCRATS WANT JEFFERSON FOR VICE-PRESIDENT." The room whirled. Senator Jefferson felt terribly dizzy. He sensed a hand holding him up. "And that's not all, Senator," the short agent was saying. "There's about fifty reporters at the embassy to see you. I'm supposed to bring you there right now."

Was it a dream? Senator Jefferson wondered. He shook his head to get the room back in focus. Slowly, the short agent re-appeared, still grinning broadly and tugging the senator's sleeve.

"Come on," the short agent urged. "Boy, Senator, I knew you were going to be famous -- I knew you were a great man all the time."

"I . . . I . . . ." Senator Jefferson was stunned.

"Save that for later," the short agent said. "Come on. Let's go."

"Yes . . . yes . . . ," Senator Jefferson nodded, a smile gradually creeping onto his face. He looked at the papers again. By God, it was true! He laughed out loud
and grabbed the short agent, and the two of them danced happily around the room, Senator Jefferson yelling, "It's true! It's true!" and the short agent singing "Yes, Mr. Vice-President! Yes sir, Mr. Vice-President!"

"Oh, for Christ's sake," Lieutenant Colonel Burnside growled from the cell. "Get these goddamned things off me!" He banged his handcuffs against the bars.

Major Pearson kicked at the bars. "Senator! What about General Rush? We've got to find the sonofabitch!"

Senator Jefferson never heard. He was out the door and on his way to the embassy, leaving the cell key lying on the floor.

The door opened again within a few minutes, and a short, burly M.P. sergeant came in, yawning. He poked the dozing man at the desk. "OK, Perkins, thanks for fillin' in. Ya'll can go back and get some sleep now." The man stumbled out the door, and the sergeant sat down at the desk, still yawning.

"Let me out of here, goddamnit," Lieutenant Colonel Burnside snarled from the cell.

The sergeant raised his bush black eyebrows. He picked up a night stick and walked over to the cell, tapping it on his palm as he walked. Quite suddenly, he reached out and rapped Lieutenant Colonel Burnside's knuckles, which were wrapped around the bars.

"Ow! Ow! Goddamm OW!" Lieutenant Colonel Burnside
fell back into the cell, cursing and holding his hand.

"Now, boys," the sergeant drawled sleepily, "let's try to keep the noise down, huh? I'm a little tired today, and I need a nap." With that, he walked back to the desk and leaned back in the chair, pulling his cap down over his eyes.

"I'm innocent!" Captain Renfro squealed.

Without lifting his cap, the sergeant chuckled. "Ain't we all?"

"I knew it," Captain Renfro sniffled. "I knew we'd never get out."

"Oh, shut up, Renfro," Major Pearson mumbled. He walked over and kicked Colonel Majeskie, then sat by himself in a corner.

General Rush looked out his office window and smiled lazily. He felt better than he had in months. Having Hartley back had made all the difference. General Rush slept better now, his throat felt fine, even his stomach was settled. He walked smiling to the door and opened it.

"Hartley!" he yelled. Then he went to his desk and sat down.

Major Hartley appeared at the door, puffing, within seconds. "Yessir?" he panted, "Yessir?"
"Nothing, Hartley, nothing," General Rush smiled. It felt so good to yell at Hartley that General Rush simply did it now as a kind of therapy. "You can go back to your work now, Hartley. I'll call you if I need you. Oh, by the way -- I'll be gone the rest of the afternoon -- I have some shopping to do."

"Yessir," Major Hartley said tiredly. He went into the hall. Tears welled up in his eyes. He thought sadly of the carefree days in the whorehouse, with nothing to do but clean floors and bow to customers. Even his latest job of messenger, escorting customers, had been such a delight compared to this -- until that fateful day in the alley. He thought of the burden upon him now: with Major Virelli and Major Pearson and the rest of the staff gone, General Rush had given all their duties to Major Hartley -- he was now the Intelligence Officer, the Operations Officer, the Transportation Officer, and the general's personal staff combined. He sighed heavily and walked past the two M.P.'s outside his door and went slowly into this office.

One thought tortured Major Hartley day and night -- escape. If he could but escape once more, he would have to be killed before he would allow himself to be brought back again. Escape. The word was like music, like the taunting chords of the wind in the palm trees of some far-away paradisical hideaway, far beyond the reach of the army.
He got up slowly from his desk, as he did forty times a day and tiptoed to the door. Very slowly and quietly, he opened it and peeked out as he did forty times every day, his briefcase in his hand, loaded with civilian clothes. And then, like every time before, he sighed and went back to his desk and put the briefcase under it.

Two M.P.'s stuck their heads in the door. "Going somewhere, Major?" one of them asked with a sneer. Then they both chuckled and resumed their stations in the hall outside the office door. Major Hartley buried his face in the papers on his desk and sobbed.

General Rush looked into Major Hartley's office on his way out and saw the major collapsed on a pile of papers on his desk.

"Get your lazy ass to work, Hartley!" he yelled. "There'll be no sleeping on government time around here!" It pleased him to hear the surprised cry and to see the papers flying off the desk in all directions.

General Rush winked at the two M.P.'s as he left. They grinned and saluted.

Having Major Hartley back had so enthused General Rush that he had decided to have another operation. Rong Song had been a mess, but this time he would keep Majeskie on the ground and do all the flying himself.
General Rush got into his new jeep and drove to his private quarters. The best way to get information for an operation would be to bribe Susie, his housegirl, as he had done before. So General Rush had decided to take her shopping at the PX.

In the jeep, Susie sat snapping her gum and holding a transistor radio to her ear. General Rush could hear Buck Owens wailing about lost love. "Now, Susie, I want you to . . . ." He noticed she wasn't listening to anything he said, that she had her eyes closed, snapping her gum and moving her head to the song. General Rush reached over and grabbed the radio and shut it off.

"Hey, you GI!" Susie had yelled angrily. "You play my song!"

"Not until we have a talk," General Rush said sternly, determined to prove that an American general outranked a Vietnamese housegirl.

"No song -- no talk," Susie folder her arms and looked away.

General Rush seethed. "All right, goddammit." He switched the radio back on, but by now the song was over, and another one was playing.

"Wrong song," Susie said, pouting.

"Oh, for Christ's . . . ." General Rush stopped the jeep with a jerk. He said the words over to himself. "Wrong song . . . wrong song . . . ." Suddenly it hit him. "Rong
"Wrong Song!" he said aloud. His mind went back in a flash to the first time Susie had said that. "Wrong song . . . Rong Song . . . ." General Rush compared the two. Then it had all been a . . . a mistake? The whole operation?

"Well, I'll be goddamned," General Rush chuckled. He started the jeep and took off again, chuckling at the joke. "Wrong song . . . Rong Song . . . .," he repeated to himself, snickering and chuckling each time. "Well, I'll be goddamned."

Susie eyed him strangely and then went back to snapping her gum and listening to the radio.

At the PX, Susie led the general all around the store, until he finally took her by the arm and shook his finger at her. "Now, look," he told her sternly, "you will get nothing from me until I get information from you."

Susie snapped her gum and pointed to the children's section, where soldiers bought toys for their children. "I no talk 'til I get . . . .," she began, pouting.

"Bullshit," General Rush growled in a low voice. "You'll get nothing from me until you tell me where the Viet Cong are."

Susie glared at him defiantly. "Buy me toy," she said, refusing to compromise.

General Rush raised his eyebrows and leaned closer, narrowing his eyes. "What did you say?"

"Buy me toy!" Susie said, stamping her foot.

General Rush clamped his hand over her mouth. "Do you want to tell the whole world?" he whispered. "Pick out
what you want," he told her, and she sniffed and sauntered away.

While Susie lovingly fondled dolls in the toy section, General Rush leaned against the tobacco counter and, putting a few loose cigars in his pocket, mulled over what Susie had said. He knew it sounded familiar. Suddenly, he slapped his hand on the counter.

"Bai My Toi!" he exclaimed. "Damned right!"

Bai My Toi was a small farming village deep in the Delta. General Rush had once, in a fit of kindness, given a dozen boxes of cigars to an orphanage there. "Bai My Toi," he said again. "Goddamned right!" He had suspected when he was there that the orphanage, filled with hundreds of slant-eyed kids, was probably a secret breeding experiment for the VC. He knew all the kids would grow up to be Viet Cong if something wasn't done right now. He pictured air strikes and artillery levelling the orphanage, knocking out a powerful VC stronghold.

He grabbed Susie and started out the door.

"Hey!" she yelled. "Buy me toy!"

"You already told me," General Rush said and hustled her past the check-out stand. Remembering the cigars stuck in his pocket, General Rush took them out and stuffed them in Susie's big wicker purse.

When they were stopped outside the door by an M.P., General Rush frowned and opened the girl's purse, and she was taken away screaming.
Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher couldn't believe what the nurse told him: the M.P.'s had come and arrested Lieutenant St. James for being AWOL.

"Where did they take him?" the chaplain asked anxiously.

The nurse thought a moment. "I think . . . let's see . . . ."

While the nurse tried to remember, the chaplain thought of the poor loyal lieutenant put behind bars -- and all for trying to help a fellow man. The chaplain thought sadly of his master plan, now thwarted. Since Lieutenant St. James had determined to be a minister, Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher wanted to take him on a tour of Saigon's houses of ill repute. The chaplain remembered only too well how his own sin had originated inside one of them. And he remembered the endless tests God had put him through before finally pronouncing him cleansed. He had hoped by the tour to show Lieutenant St. James the sinful side of life, so that he would never be trapped into sin as the chaplain had been. Looking back on his own rough road to saintliness, the chaplain knew he could direct Lieutenant St. James to salvation, could ease the way a little and teach him to avoid the pitfalls of sin. And what better way to convert souls, what more abundant supply of tarnished souls, than to be found in the dark chain of houses that locked Saigon into a sinful prison of its own creation.
But now . . . now it was too late. Lieutenant St. James had been taken away.

"I'm just not sure," the nurse said at last. "I suppose they would take him to . . . ."

"Excuse me, ma'am." A tall, slender M.P. tapped the nurse on the arm. "We'll be taking the prisoner now."

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher grabbed the M.P.'s arm. "Do you have Lieutenant St. James?" he asked urgently.

The M.P. surveyed the hand on his arm casually until it was removed. Then he drawled, "That's right, Chaplain."

"May I see him?" the chaplain pleaded. "Please, I must see him." The chaplain had no idea what he could, or would, say to the lieutenant, but he felt certain he should see him and try somehow to re-assure him, to tell him God still loved him.

"Well, now, Chaplain . . . .," the M.P. said, shaking his head slowly. "I just don't know . . . ."

A second M.P. walked up, leading Lieutenant St. James in handcuffs.

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher rushed to him and grabbed his hands. "My son . . . .," he began, his eyes filling with tears at the sight of the gentle young man in chains, led like a common criminal. "My son . . . ."

"It's all right, Chaplain," Lieutenant St. James said softly.
The chaplain tried bravely to hold back the tears. "It was going to be beautiful," he said. "I was going to take you to some houses of ill repute . . . ."

"Chaplain!" Lieutenant St. James was shocked.

"Oh, no . . . no, I . . . you don't understand," the chaplain tried to explain, suddenly and terribly aware of what the lieutenant was thinking. "Oh, no, Lieutenant . . . I . . . ."

"All right, all right," the tall M.P. drawled, pushing the chaplain aside. "That's enough. We've got business to do." The two policemen dragged Lieutenant St. James away down the hall, as the chaplain looked on, shaking his head and muttering, "No, Lieutenant . . . you don't understand . . . you . . . ."

"Don't worry about it, Chaplain." The chaplain heard a strange voice and felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned around. A tall captain stood looking down the hall, wiping his sunglasses.

"Who are you?" the chaplain asked.

The captain put his glasses on. "I'm Captain Watson." He pointed down the hall. "St. James was one of my forward observers." He shook his head. "Too bad about him. He was gone so long from the battery, I had to call the M.P.'s to get him back." He looked at the chaplain. "But I decided to give him another chance, anyway."

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher looked at the captain curiously, "A chance for what?"
"I decided to give him a break," Captain Watson said. "You see, Chaplain, St. James is the only experienced F.O. in the battery. Now, he's not going to do me any good sitting in jail, so I'm going to drop the charges and give him another chance to straighten up." He smiled. "We need him in the field."

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher was stunned. He couldn't believe it. Lieutenant St. James in the field again? Calling artillery? Killing people? Oh no! It must be a nightmare, he thought, trying to wake up. The poor boy! He rubbed his eyes -- when he opened them, the captain was smiling.

"The only problem I foresee," Captain Watson said, "is getting a radio operator for St. James." He chuckled. "He went through them pretty quick." He winked at the chaplain. "But I'm sure we'll find a volunteer somewhere." He smiled and walked away down the hall.

Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher sat down on a stool in the hall and stared sadly at the floor. Oh Lord, he prayed, the tests . . . so many tests. Slowly, he got up and walked down the hall where Lieutenant St. James had gone. He turned his eyes upward and stood still, staring ahead.

"Will you ever be through with me?" he cried.

"Yes, thank you," the young doctor said as he passed the chaplain. "You can go any time now. We're through with you."
Chaplain Beaumont-Fletcher sighed and went out the door, not knowing what to do, knowing exactly what had to be done, feeling humble and weak and divinely put upon.

General Rush knew he needed a staff and a brigade commander and a good battalion commander for his operation. And he knew where they were. He pondered whether he should leave them all in Saigon in jail and get new ones or go to Saigon and get them out. After a great deal of thought, he decided it would be easier to get them out than take the risk of recruiting a whole new batch probably no less incompetent than the rest. Besides, new men always brought in new ideas on operations and tactics and such, and General Rush had all the new ideas he needed, and they were all old proven ones.

He arrived at the big M.P. station and went inside. The new M.P. sergeant sat in his chair snoring. General Rush kicked the sergeant's chair over. The sergeant came up cursing.

"Watch your language, goddamnit," General Rush told him.

"Yessir," the sergeant said meekly, seeing who had kicked him over.

General Rush went to the big cell and looked in. All the officers lay on the floor asleep, except Major Virelli, who still slept on his cot.

General Rush frowned. He didn't like being ignored, and he didn't like being farted at. "On your feet!" he roared. Everyone in the cell stood up. Even the M.P. sergeant snapped to attention.

"Now, gentlemen," General Rush began, walking up and down in front of the cell. "I am going to give you all a chance to redeem yourselves" -- he paused to let the grumbling subside -- "and seeing that you are all in jail here without formal charges levelled against you and thus could be here for the duration" -- he paused again -- "I'm sure you will be interested in a little proposition I have for you . . . ." He let his voice trail off dramatically and walked to the window, keeping his back to the angry men.

"Now, gentlemen," he said at last, turning around, "I have received very important secret information on a Viet Cong stronghold deep in the Delta. If any of you care to resume your old positions and take part in the operation, the sergeant will unlock the door and you may step out -- free men. Otherwise . . . ." He smiled and turned around to look out the window and wait for the stampede as the sergeant unlocked the door and stepped back.
The officers all stood silently looking at each other. Then they looked at the open door, then at General Rush, then back at the open door, and then at each other again.

As they stood wondering, each in his own mind, what the percentages were each way, the front door opened and an M.P. came in, dragging the old Vietnamese man. His knife had been taken away, and he sat on the floor crying while he was booked.

None of the men in the cell noticed the old man . . . except Colonel Majeskie, who stared wide-eyed at the old man, mumbling under his breath.

Lieutenant Colonel Burnside was the first to move. Thinking of having his own helicopter to fly above the action, he decided he would even follow Jesus into the wilderness. He marched out of the cell, holding up his handcuffs, "Get these goddamned things off me."

Major Pearson leaned his head against the bars. Jesus Christ, how he hated the thought of serving under General Rush again! But what better place and time than in a battle to drill the sonofabitch between the eyes? He stepped out of the cell, staring with hatred at the general's broad back.

Captain Renfro followed silently.

Major Virelli yawned and came out, not caring much any more what happened, knowing he had only a few days left in Viet Nam anyway.
General Rush heard the cell door clang shut behind him. He smiled and turned around.

"I'm glad to see that you all . . . ." He stopped and counted the men standing before him. "Who's missing?"

The officers looked at each other.


"I'm sorry, sir," the M.P. sergeant whined. "He grabbed it right out of my hand."

All the officers stood looking into the cell, where Colonel Majeskie sat under the bunk, holding the cell key tightly in both hands. While the officers stared and General Rush cursed and the M.P. sergeant whined, Colonel Majeskie sat under the bunk with the key in his hands and thought of the old man sitting in the middle of the floor and of General Rush and the whorehouse and the snipers and, for the first time since he'd been in Viet Nam, Colonel Majeskie felt safe. He smiled and held onto the key as tightly as he could with both hands.

Spec Four Mike Johnson sat by the big water-filled drainage ditch that ran through the battery area, thinking of home. The grassy bank of the ditch was his private place, the only place he could come at night to think and to be alone. Sometimes he even prayed here. He had a lot to be thankful for -- he felt of his feet -- not only were
his feet still intact, they were healed. He had taken care of them since the last time he had run home from the hospital, and now the redness and scaliness and maddening itch were gone. And the feet were still there. Thank you, he prayed silently, thank you.

Spec Four Johnson looked up. The night was clear, and the stars shone brightly enough for him to see a figure approaching. Having only nine days left in Viet Nam, Spec Four Johnson was taking no chances. He crawled quickly behind some thick bushes.

The figure came cautiously forward, looking all around.

Spec Four Johnson recognized him as one of the new men in the infantry company up the road, a nervous country boy of about eighteen.

The boy sat down on the grass of the bank and took off his boots and socks. He let his legs dangle over the edge, so that his bare feet were in the dirty ditch water.

Spec Four Johnson came out of hiding and stood behind the boy. "What are you doing?" he whispered.

The boy gasped and jerked his feet out of the water. He looked up and realized Spec Four Johnson wasn't an officer. "Shhh," he said and put his feet back into the water. "I ain't goin' out on that operation they got planned, man," he whispered loudly. "I ain't goin' out and gettin' my butt shot at. I'm fixin' my feet so's they'll have to send me to the hospital." He splashed his feet quietly in the muddy water.
Spec Four Johnson looked at the boy a moment. Then he sat down and looked into the dark water. "Let me tell you a story about that . . . ," he began.