
TWO**Stuck In Limbo**

Fort Lewis, Washington

April, 1968

Lying on my back, hands clasped beneath my head for some small measure of comfort, I stared up at the bare, incandescent bulb hanging high over the aisle at the foot of my bunk. I couldn't help feeling that of all the old-style Army barracks I'd been in, this one had to be the most depressing.

The bunk, actually not much more than a metal frame, was devoid of pillow or blankets so that the only thing between me and its meshed metal strapping was a thin, brown-stained mattress. Coupled with that was the smell of exposed timber framing from the floor, walls, and ceiling, along with the mustiness of the mattress itself. My newly issued jungle fatigues offered little protection from the damp chill of the night air.

Still staring at that bulb, I thought about the dozen or so other young guys lying on bunks up and down the length of this room. There was no reason to doubt that they felt any differently about this dreary building than I did. Instinctively, I knew that they could no more sleep than I could.

This prison-like sparseness was typical of most Army transient quarters. They were buildings used to temporarily house men passing through on their way to some other destination,...men who wouldn't be around long enough to need any real amenities...and the depressing atmosphere of these particular buildings was due to the fact that they were the last staging area before leaving for Vietnam.

It was about 9:00 PM and we all knew that at some point, just before sunrise, we'd be trucked over to McChord Air Force Base, a short distance from Fort Lewis, where we were right now. There we'd board a commercial Tiger airliner for the long flight to Southeast Asia.

Oddly enough, though I wasn't too crazy about our next destination, I wished wholeheartedly that the time would stop dragging by as if every minute were an hour. The men who came here usually had to spend three days while their paperwork was being processed by the Overseas Transportation Center and these past three days had seemed the longest of my life.

One of the main reasons for this merciless lag was that after the Army issued our new jungle fatigues, on our first morning here, there was little else to do but hang around and wait.

Waiting and thinking. ...The thinking. ...That was the toughest part of it. The last thing we needed right now was a lot of time to think about where we were headed. I figured this must be how the Christians felt before going into the lions den.

Even during the day, when I walked around the company area behind the barracks, the tension in the air was so thick I felt as if I could almost put my hand out and touch it. Though there were a lot of men here, waiting for their flights out, there was none of the kidding around or spontaneous laughter that was usually common when a bunch of young guys were together. Instead, whenever I'd see five or six of them standing in a group, their conversation was unusually subdued. And on those rare occasions when someone made a comment that caused the others to chuckle, even that laughter had a nervous strain to it.

The awful stress of our predicament was due largely to what seemed to me a gross oversight on the part of the military. We'd been given the finest training that the service could supply, but we'd been told

absolutely nothing about what it was going to be like when we stepped off the plane. Would there be some kind of procedure for getting used to it gradually...or would we have to grab a rifle and hit the dirt firing? Maybe the Army's reasoning was that we'd find out soon enough anyway, but that didn't go a long way in alleviating the anxiety of not knowing. If there really was such a place as Limbo, it had to be a lot like this.

Then, just as it had at about the same time every night, that glaring bulb up there went out. In the darkness I could hear an occasional cough from the other men in the long room and, from somewhere off in the distance, the incessant whine of a lone diesel generator.

With only a matter of hours now until that light came on again, and it was time to go, my thoughts drifted back to seven months earlier when my path was abruptly altered toward this very night.