
NINE**The Silver Tiger**

My thoughts were interrupted by that bare bulb coming on again overhead. At the same time, there was a voice from somewhere downstairs calling out.

“Okay, let’s go! Up and at em! Fall outside for formation!”

I sat up on the edge of the bunk and rubbed my eyes. The other guys in the long room were pulling their duffels out from under their bunks and heading toward the door at the rear of the building. I grabbed my own bag and followed. It was obvious from their appearance and slumped posture that they felt as bone-weary as I.

When we were outside and lined up in formation, a sergeant with a clipboard took a roll call to make sure we were all there.

Though it was still dark and the rest of the fort appeared to be as deserted as before, the company area where we stood was bustling with activity. Out-of-country flights ran on a strict schedule and the personnel in charge of preparing men to leave had to see that everything went smoothly.

While they were getting things ready, a convoy of trucks, with headlights cutting through the barely discernible gray light of dawn pulled up and parked on the street in front of the barracks.

We men, standing in the ranks, couldn’t help shivering in the damp air, and I could still hear that generator droning somewhere off in the distance.

Just as the eastern horizon began to show the faintest orange glow of the sun, we approximately sixty new men climbed into the backs of the trucks and were driven off. The convoy left the fort and traveled along the main road through Tacoma.

From my seat, on a wooden bench, I watched the closed store fronts pass by. In just a few hours, those deserted sidewalks would have shoppers walking them, going into the stores. It was disconcerting to think that people would be following their normal, everyday routines without a second thought about the men who were passing by on their way to war. Not at all like the send-offs of World Wars I and II. It was more like we were being shipped out the back door so no one would notice.

The convoy pulled into McChord Air Force Base and stopped outside a chain link fence that enclosed the apron where the planes were parked. We jump out and fell into formation again, just in front of the fence.

A short distance on the other side of that fence, a Tiger Airlines 707 stood away from the other planes, boarding ramps positioned at its two open doors. All the men stared at it as if mesmerized by the orange glow of the rising sun mirrored in its shining silver body.

We'd all seen planes before, but there was a deeply mysterious quality to this one, part of the mystique of the unknown where it would be taking us.

During the short wait while our duffel bags were loaded into the baggage compartment, I noticed a group of officers standing off to one side. They were also on their way over and boarded before the rest of us. The privileges of rank. Then we enlisted men climbed the steps and went in.

I felt lucky, if luck had anything at all to do with this trip, to get a window seat just forward of the right wing. When I was settled in, I watched the seats fill with men in green jungle fatigues. There'd be no non-military passengers on this flight.

It did seem rather odd, however, that there were civilian stewardesses helping everyone get comfortable. The only thing I could figure was that the plane must be going to land somewhere along the way and drop them off before reaching its final destination.

When everything was set, and the engines warmed up, the plane taxied to the end of the runway.

In the few minutes while we waited for clearance from the control tower, most of the idle talk among the men died away. The realization had finally set in that shortly the country and homes we'd known all our lives would be left far behind. Until this very moment, that fact hadn't been driven solidly home. Now it felt like the most important thing in the world.

The plane roared down the runway and made a perfectly normal takeoff. As it climbed into the cloudless, blue sky, everyone, including myself, craned their necks to watch the west coast of the United States disappear slowly behind us.

When there was nothing below but the massive expanse of the Pacific Ocean, I leaned back in my seat. I had absolutely no idea where this flight would be going, other than its final destination, of course, which was Vietnam. But even that was a mystery. With a lot of time to do nothing but wait, I closed my eyes and let my thoughts drift back.