
FOURTEEN**Pretty Pink**

Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam
April 1968

The low, steady rumble of the engines, to which we'd become so accustomed, dropped off almost completely so that it felt as if we were riding a giant glider drifting silently in on the wind. That quiet, along with the nervous hush of everyone on board, added to the drama of our approach.

It became increasingly clear that most of the others knew as little about what to expect as I. Those in the aisle seats craned their necks to get a look at whatever there might be to see out in the darkness.

We began to make out the black form of a mountain ridge silhouetted against the starry horizon. We were passing very close to it, its peaks drifting by at about the same height as our plane. Visible on the tops of some of those peaks were occasional incandescent lights, glowing like lonely sentinels passing by in silence. These were weather and radar posts set up to scan the countryside.

Suddenly, the plane assumed a fairly steep forward pitch and literally dove for the end of the runway. It dropped several thousand feet in a hurry, giving us the strange sensation of going down in a speeding elevator. Presumably, this unorthodox approach was to avoid any enemy fire that might be directed at the plane from those nearby mountains.

Within a matter of seconds we touched down and the plane slowed until it was taxiing. It moved to the far end of the runway and made a turn toward the debarking area, every window jammed with

the faces of men eager to see whatever they could, wanting to know what it was like now that we were finally here. It was almost as if we'd landed on another planet and wanted to see how different it was from the world we'd left behind.

In the distance, off to one side, there was a whole complex of brightly lit terminal buildings and hangers with a fleet of four-engined C-130s, looking like giant, over-fattened dolphins parked out in front. Several were warming up in preparation for take-off. With all the bright lights, and the steady drone of those engines, the area had the feeling of bustling activity.

Within minutes of coming to a stop, we new arrivals deboarded and were shuffled into a convoy of green military buses that had driven out onto the tarmac to meet us. The only difference between those and regular civilian buses, besides their color, was the fact that there were metal gratings over all the windows so that no one could toss a hand grenade inside.

The buses took us off the field and into a nearby barracks area where new arrivals were temporarily quartered. Again, these were the old World War II type barracks, but with a difference. Instead of wood covering the walls all the way from floor to ceiling, it only went about half-way up. The rest of the way was open with mesh screening all the way around. Naturally, that was due to the extreme heat and myriad insects that were typical of a tropical climate.

It struck me as rather odd that, upon arrival, no one of any authority met with us to tell us what to do next. The bus drivers simply told us to find a bunk in one of the empty barracks and settle in until morning. Then they drove away. Evidently the normal workday here didn't start until morning, just like anywhere else.

After all the anxiety of what it was going to be like when we got there, I almost had the feeling of being dropped off at a remote bus depot, in the middle of nowhere, with no one around. Rather an inauspicious entrance after what we'd anticipated. Not that I was complaining, you understand. If my next twelve months were as quiet as this, I'd be more than happy. It just seemed odd.

There wasn't anything to do but hang around or try to get some sleep and I'd gotten enough of that on the plane so that I was wide awake. Besides, it was much too hot and humid anyway.

I figured I'd take a short walk around the immediate area and check out if there was anything interesting to see. When I went out the back door of the barracks, there were two other men sitting on the steps. The entire area was brightly lit by amber lights high up on telephone type poles. One of the men slapped at a mosquito on the back of his neck.

"Damned things are all over the place out here," he said in disgust.

I couldn't help but smile, "I have a feeling that's something we're going to have to get used to."

Then the second man spoke, "If it's this hot and humid at night, what the hell's it going to be like when the sun comes up?"

I let out a long, slow breath in contemplation and answered as I made my way down the steps, "I don't even want to think about that."

There wasn't much to see there at the back of the barracks, so I walked around to the front and stood in the dusty, hard-packed, dirt road down which the buses had brought us. In the distance I could hear the steady drone of a C-130's engines coming from the air field we just left. The near side of the field was only a couple of hundred yards away, down at the end of the street, so that we'd be hearing the constant sound of engines all night.

Looking up the road, in the direction opposite the field, and way out in the distance, I could see a range of black mountains silhouetted against the slightly lighter night sky. They rose abruptly, near the shore of the bay off to my right, and ran diagonally away toward the West. A nearly full moon had risen into the clear sky of bright, twinkling stars. Everything seemed so tranquil that it was hard to imagine this being anything other than just another military base like all the others I'd seen,...then I caught sight of something out of the corner of my eye.

Against the black surface of the distant mountains a tiny string of pinkish colored lights zipped from one point to another. It was only visible for a second before it disappeared and was followed immediately by a second string. I recognized them as tracers, the phosphorescent bullets that were used at night so that a man could see where his rounds were going.

I was transfixed by those rounds. They were much too far away for any sound to be heard, so that they had a ghostly essence to them. Actually, they looked rather pretty, I thought, against the black backdrop of the mountains.

I'd seen tracers on many a night during training, but there was something new and unsettling about the ones I was watching now. This was the first time I'd actually seen them used by people who were shooting at each other. This was no training exercise, it was deadly serious business.

While I was watching, a Huey glided in just a short distance away, headed for the airport. It crossed the disk of the moon with its red and green running lights blinking on and off. Again, because of my inexperience, it seemed odd that a helicopter would nonchalantly fly by without the slightest acknowledgment of the obvious shooting that was taking place out there in the mountains. Until I

became used to being in a war zone myself, it would seem unsettling that anyone could be complacent about gunfire.

Though I'd spent the past two months becoming proficient with all types of weaponry, never once had I actually used one against another human being. Naturally, during training, you knew, whenever you fired at a dummy target, that there'd come a time when you would have to do the same against real people, but you had no way of knowing how it would affect you. It was something you gave a lot of thought to, just like I was doing right now

Seeing those tracers out there, for the first time being used to try and kill someone, suddenly made the contemplation of having to do that myself extremely important. Would I be able to do it when the necessity arose?