

More Stories!

Writers' Forum

Number 047

February 2008

El Cid

by W. H. Payne

Danny O'Connor sat on an upholstered barstool in the cool dimness and stirred his third seven and seven of the evening. The air conditioner droned and Johnny Cash was telling how he had fallen into a ring of fire and how it burned, burned, burned.

On the wall behind the bar hung crossed AK-47 assault rifles and beneath them a red and blue Viet Cong flag with a yellow star in the middle. Beneath that was mounted the long, black, wicked-looking barrel of a Soviet-built recoilless rifle.

Souvenirs of the never-ending war, thought Danny.

He fired up another Lucky and looked around at the other sergeants talking quietly in small groups at the tables scattered across the floor of the little Quonset hut. He thought of how much he liked the Sergeants Club.

In this, his second tour in Viet Nam, he had become well acquainted with the NCO clubs in the Da Nang area. On his first tour, as a grunt with

the 1st Marine Division, he had rarely seen the inside of a club. Now that he was assigned to the Air Wing, swinging with the Wing, he had become a connoisseur.

He liked the Sergeants Club because it was cool. Not just the air-conditioning, all the clubs had that, but because it was quiet and calm. It was for E-5 Sergeants only, not for corporals and sergeants like the 4-5 clubs, which were big and noisy, or the 1-2-3 clubs for the lowest three enlisted ranks; privates, PFCs and lance corporals, which featured 18 year-olds puking into big plastic garbage cans and slipping on spilled beer. He wasn't a staff NCO, so he didn't get to go to the clubs for the senior sergeants and didn't want to anyway as they were filled with old guys in their thirties and forties.

No, he thought; give me the Sergeants Club every time. The best club in the 1st Marine Air Wing compound, except for the music. Danny preferred The Beatles, The Stones, Hendrix, Janis, The Doors, and The Temptations, not necessarily in that order. The Sergeants Club musical selections ran more often to country and western. But Johnny Cash was okay.

So, he sat back, took a pull each of his cigarette and his drink and thought of how he deserved a restful night after finishing an investigation this afternoon which had included policing up the remains of a Marine, probably on acid, who had gone into a bunker and blown his head off with a grenade. A Marine who probably had once been a good Marine before he got a hold of drugs and vice versa.

At least the dude had the courtesy to use the bunker and not blow up his buddies along with him, Danny thought to himself.

He reached for his drink again, his hand shook and he sloshed a few drops on the bar. He remembered how not drugs but booze had brought down some of the many New York City cops and firemen in his family.

He quickly put that thought aside and thought instead that another thing he liked about the Sergeants Club was that it was just a short walk

across the compound from the Criminal Investigation Division, CID, hootch were he worked and slept. He didn't have to worry about trying to drive the duty jeep after an evening of attitude adjustment.

The Sergeants Club is cool, and it is going to be a good night, if we don't get a rocket attack, he thought looking out across the smiling faces in the room.

A smiling face came through the door. It was Corporal Shelton Newby of Mount Healthy, Ohio. Danny's good night came to an abrupt end. The corporal would only come into the club on business, CID business.

Newby did a quick visual sweep of the room and spotted Danny. His face went from smiling to grinning, his blue eyes dancing behind his thick glasses, as he walked to the bar.

"Good Evening, Sergeant", he said, with a bow taking obvious delight in obliterating a mellow mood.

"Dude got zapped in the Wing Support living area", he continued, "They got the guy who did it locked up in the Connex box; private from the engineers squadron. One of the ones", he added, lowering his voice, "we were going to bust tomorrow for dealing."

"Would it do any good for me to point out that I am off duty?" Danny asked. He knew that it wouldn't

Newby did the impossible and grinned even more widely.

"Captain said he wants you to handle it, Danny, told me to take the duty jeep and come and get you, said he has more important things to do tonight."

"Yeah, right, like peeping the Army nurses compound with the Starlight Scope." Danny was disgusted.

"Indubitably", replied Newby. He always took pride in demonstrating that he was among the 1.9% of enlisted Marines with a college degree.

"All right, let's do it", Danny was resigned. He chugged the remainder of his drink, and his right hand went instinctively up under his loose camo jacket to check the .38 Smith & Wesson on his belt. He followed the corporal out into the dank night and took his place in the passenger seat of the jeep.

In a minute they were out of the Wing headquarters compound and barreling down the road between the fence of the huge air base on the left and the edge of the Da Nang perimeter on the right

High in the western sky, behind Hill 327, a red light twinkled and a snake of crimson neon tracer uncoiled down into Happy Valley. After a while, a faint sound like a siren came across the rice paddies. The high cyclic rate of the three electrically-fired Gatlings on board Spooky, the old C-47 gunship, made them sound higher pitched than ordinary machineguns.

"Get some, Spooky", said Danny in devout prayer that the gunship would get some of the Vietcong or NVA or whoever, and mess them up, make them dead before they had a chance to do the same to him and his fellow Marines, soldiers, airmen, sailors, coasties or whoever. It was a simple philosophy, not complicated like those he had studied at Fordham.

"Get some," Newby agreed.

They turned into the living area barely slowing for the lax wave-on of the lax MPs at the check point.

The living area for Wing Support; seven lettered rows of hootches with ten numbered hootches in each row, situated on the filled-in half of a swamp near the air base flight line. Each hootch a standard tropical hut-size barracks with space for six to eight Marines living in individual cubicles. The hootches were plywood sheathed up to waist height with metal screening the rest of the way up to the pitched, corrugated tin roof. Despite the screening, the occupants sweltered, except in

monsoon season, when they shivered. The monsoon flooding was why all the hootches were built up on stilts about two feet high. Between every other pair of hootches was a sand bag bunker about five feet high, a good place to go to quickly if the enemy decided to launch a salvo of their big .122 mm artillery rockets from out in Happy Valley. Two red painted fifty-five gallon drums filled with water were stationed at the end of each lane between hootches where no bunker stood in case such an attack would start a fire. Good military planning throughout.

This living area was where most of the Marines who supported the Wing made their home; the enlisted specialists it took to run Marine Aviation lived here. The average age was nineteen, they were all well armed, with issued M-16s and assorted other weapons both issued and not, 90% used alcohol, most of those to excess, and 10% also used drugs regularly. Every so often, for one reason or another, they killed each other.

The jeep lurched to a stop in front of the Security Command Post. It was built of dark green sandbags, which glistened in the damp air like the discarded shells of some great slimy insects. A silver painted Connex box, fabricated of steel, six feet on a side stood next to the CP. Ordinarily used for the shipment of delicate cargo, this one was a cell with a regulation, barred, one foot square window cut in the door.

Captain Paranza, the officer in charge of the CID detachment, was rummaging around behind the flash wall at the entrance of the CP bunker. He was cursing under his breath.

"Where in the hell is that Starlight Scope, it's supposed to be right here on this stand with the M-60s, if I find out who took it without signing for it..."

The radio operators and MPs in the CP, their faces ghastly in the red light from the electrical power panel, studiously ignored him.

Danny stepped up to the flash wall and saluted. "Sergeant O'Connor reporting as ordered, sir"

"It's about goddamn time, O'Connor", the Captain interrupted, "you have got stuff to do here."

Paranza didn't return the salute, so Danny held it a few beats longer to illustrate the point and then let it go.

Paranza never looked up as he continued thrashing about the CP in search of the missing scope and presumably the M-16 rifle attached to it.

"Get back to hooch E-10", he growled, "and start your investigation. Interview the witnesses and then come back here and interrogate that clown in the Connex who did the shooting. Whenever he comes around, that is. He's passed out now. And hurry up; I want that report on my desk first thing in the morning. The JAG lawyers are going to need it right away so they can write up the charges. This is open and shut, so don't screw around and waste time like you usually do. Now get on it!"

"Aye, Aye, sir", Danny gave the only legally acceptable answer among the many which had been going through his mind. He turned to Newby.

"You got the duty camera?" he asked.

"I do now", Newby replied and they walked among the hootches toward the E-row.

An Air Force F-4 Phantom jet thundered into the black sky on afterburners, lifting off the runway just three hundred meters to their front. The noise was a solid thing drumming on the chest.

"Another load of ordinance for the Parrot's Beak", said Danny. "This war was supposed to be winding down and now we are going into Cambodia. It will never end, we will never win it, and it will never end. "

"There it is", said Newby, "especially with morons like Paranza in charge. Complaining about who took the Starlight Scope, as if he doesn't know where it is."

Danny turned to Newby and was about to speak when the towering figure of MP Lance Corporal Trevor Atley joined them.

"Hey", he said, "How you doing Danny? How you like the way I secured the man. After he did the shooting, they were all yelling for security, and that's me, I'm security, so I secured the man".

Because Trevor was from Barbados, he pronounced man like mon.

They walked together along the aisle between the hootches until they reached a circle of light where a crowd of Marines, mostly dressed only in skivvies, milled about.

"I go running back to where I hear the shots", Trevor went on, "and I see him running away by the swamp. I see him easy; he was just wearing white skivvies. So I speed up and I catch him. He didn't have no weapon when I secured him though. He must have thrown it away, but he did the shooting all right. He told me he did it."

Trevor went on to report all he knew about the shooting, while the witnesses chimed in with their individual stories and Danny jotted down notes and took names.

The shooter was a private, a carpenter in the engineering and repair squadron. His name was Larry Todd. He was a native of Kentucky. Danny recognized the name. Newby was right. Todd was one of those who would have been picked up in the raid tomorrow and charged with dealing grass, meth, acid and heroin.

Todd, who did not bunk in E-IO, had entered the front door of the hooch at about 22:30 hours, when most of the men were in their cubes. He had been carrying an M-16 rifle, had passed between the cubes on each side of the hootch and had gone directly to the cube of Corporal Schmitz, the last one on the right, in the corner. Schmitz also worked in the repair squadron and was known to Danny as the undercover operative for CID who had helped set up the impending drug raid. Todd had been obviously intoxicated and he had screamed in slurred speech at Schmitz, who was sitting on his rack, words to the effect that the

Corporal was a goddamn El Cid snitch and had fingered him and his friends for the raid. Todd had pointed his rifle at Schmitz but was apparently unable to do the deed face to face. Instead of shooting, he staggered out the back door and then turned and fired at first just one shot, which caused everyone in the hootch to hit the deck and then a long, full automatic burst into the building through the wall of Schmitz cube. Some of the bullets had shattered the light bulbs hanging from the overhead. Todd then ceased firing and some of the men had gotten up when a last shot was heard and everyone hit the deck again. When they all got up again, PFC Dominick Hill was found dead in his cube, the middle one on the other side of the hootch from where Todd had been shooting.

Hill had been in Vietnam only a short time, worked at the Wing Post Office and kept to himself. He was considered by his hootch mates to be kind of odd and seemed to be scared all the time. That night, before he had gone briefly to the 1,2,3 club, he had been sitting alone out in the bunker on the far side of the hooch and was overheard talking softly to himself about rats.

As Danny was writing, he moved closer into the light and found his left trouser leg getting wet. He jumped back, looked down and saw that a stream of water was arcing out of the fire barrel next to him. The barrel had a bullet hole in it.

Another light went on inside the hootch and Danny looked up to see that a Marine had just replaced the bulb and was moving on to the next light fixture. The light shined out of the bullet holes in the plywood in front of him and Danny counted, a total of twelve holes equally distributed each side of the angle of the wall, plus two rounds that had penetrated the screening above the plywood. With the one round through the fire barrel, he had accounted for fifteen bullets fired. He told everyone to stand back and he, Newby and Atley used their penlights and sifted through the sand for the ejected shells. They quickly found fourteen casings more or less in a row, and he figured they came from the full auto burst. One shell was found by itself near the wall and Danny guessed that was from the single shot into the fire barrel.

He entered the back door the hooch where Todd had exited, and stepped over to Hill's cubicle.

"Where's the body?" he asked when he found the dead man's cube to be faintly bloodstained but empty, literally empty; no body, no gear, no boots, no pin-ups, no short-timer calendar, no bedding. As if no one had ever lived there.

Lance Corporal Atley answered.

"The Captain", he said, "ordered the bod to be taken to the NSA Hospital compound for autopsy right away. He ordered the dead guy's stuff packed and shipped right away too, and had the Corpsmen police up the mess. Said that he wanted the living area returned to normal ASAP before any more trouble started. Here is the inventory of his property and equipment I did after I came back here from locking up Todd in the Connex."

How, thought Danny, absently taking the list from Atley, do I do a murder investigation without seeing the body where the murder was committed or where it was found?

Atley came closer lowered his voice and told him that the Captain had also ordered Schmitz onto a flight to the air base down the coast at Chu Lai.

That at least was a good idea in Danny's estimation. Schmitz life was worth about two Vietnamese piasters after Todd's revelations. Word traveled fast in-country.

So much for the drug raid tomorrow, he thought. If we don't get them dirty, we don't get them and I am sure they have already dumped their stash by now.

He looked at Atley's inventory and realized that the vultures had descended. Aside from his rifle, a bandoleer of ten magazines loaded with 18 rounds each, web gear, canteens, helmet, flack jacket and other military equipment, it appeared that Hill had owned nothing.

Danny gathered Hill's surviving hooch mates and told them that they had better come up with the items they had looted from the dead man's cubicle

after the shooting, or they would all be charged with hindering a murder investigation and housed at the notorious Third MAF Brig until their court-martials could be scheduled . After considerable grumbling they filled a laundry bag with assorted clothing, a recorder, a box of cassette tapes, writing materials, two cartons of Salems, shower clogs, towels and three cans of Campbell's Chicken Noodle Soup.

Danny took the laundry bag in tow and told Newby to take pictures of what remained of the bloodstains on the rafters, the walls and the floor and of the bullet entry holes in Schmitz's cube, and the exit holes which all appeared to be through the roof. Danny theorized that Todd's shooting high had prevented more body bags from being filled.

Before leaving, he climbed up on the roof and, in proof of his theory, found light shinning up through fourteen holes in the corrugated metal. When he turned to climb down he saw another shaft of light and walked across the peak and found a bullet hole on the opposite side from the others.

He climbed down, took Ately and Newby with him, and hurried back to the CP to raise hell, as best he could, with Captain Paranza about the body being moved without his getting a look at it., but the Captain was gone.

Todd was now awake and moaning in the Connex. Danny filled a canteen cup with black coffee from the urn in the CP and Trevor pulled the shackled prisoner from his cell and seated him on an ammo crate. Danny drew up another crate and gave the coffee to Todd, who took it in his cuffed hands and sipped gingerly.

"What happened?" Todd asked. Trying to focus the bloodshot eyes in his puffy red face.

"You are being charged with the murder of Private First Class Dominick Hill", said Danny.

"Hill!" Todd shrieked, "I didn't mean to shoot Hill! He was my buddy. I didn't know him long, he only got in-country a little while ago, but he bought me beers tonight at the club and he told me

that El Cid rat bastard Schmidt had fingered us all and we're getting busted tomorrow, so I...I" Todd's voice trailed off.

Danny waited. He doubted if Todd was anywhere near sober enough to give a statement that would stand up in a court martial, but maybe he would say how it was that Hill knew that a drug raid had been planned for, Danny looked at his watch, later on today. It was now well past 2400 hours and a new day had begun in Viet Nam.

"What did I do!" Todd suddenly started sobbing and dropped the cup. "What did I do!" he screamed and started to stand, "I shot Hill, I missed that dirty bastard Schmidt, and killed my buddy!" Trevor and Danny grabbed hold of Todd, and the duty Corpsman came out of the CP. He opened his bag and quickly prepared and inserted a syringe into the man's arm. The effect was rapid. Todd slumped.

"Thorazine." said the Corpsman. "That will hold him until you get him into the observation ward at NSA"

Todd and his late, apparently unintended victim would spend the rest of the hours of darkness under the same roof.

Danny and Newby loaded Todd into the duty jeep and Danny told Trevor to start a search of the swamp for the murder weapon at first light and to request mine detectors from the Explosive Ordnance Disposal Unit to help with the search. It was possible that Todd had flung the rifle into the swamp before he had been caught.

Newby drove and they passed around the south end of the immense flight line of the air base; the fighter bombers perpetually landing and taking off. From back by the living area came the scream of sirens, warning of an imminent rocket attack. They stopped at one check point after another, and crossed the Liberty Bridge over the Han Da Nang River, where yellow parachute flares were constantly launched to discourage the VC from lobbing mortar rounds from the sand bars below. Sometimes it worked.

In about an hour they reached the Naval Supply Activity hospital complex; more plywood buildings branching in all directions, and checked Todd in for the night

While Newby used the land line to call the living area Security CP and ask about the sirens they had heard, Danny went in search of the body of the late PFC Hill.

The body was no longer at the hospital he was told. He did get to speak to the Navy doctor who had performed the autopsy

The doctor, who looked ready to fall asleep, sat in his stained scrubs, in the duty office and gave Danny coffee in a paper cup. He took a deep drag on his cigarette.

"The bod has been sent to the Army morgue over by the flight line," the doctor said rubbing his eyes, "there was apparently some priority to send it back to the world. Something about some congressman. Corporal Pena, at Graves Registration, can tell you about it, Sarge, he transported the body. As far as the autopsy, we had a busy night here, so I made it brief. Not much to say. The kid was hit in the head with a 5.56mm M-16 round, I don't have to tell you how those bullets tumble when they hit flesh and bone. The entry wound was in the region of the left mastoid process, um, I mean behind the left ear. You could say the exit wound was basically the rest of the guy's head. Pretty much exploded the cranium. You know. "

Danny knew.

"The black and white glossies are not ready yet, but I took some color Polaroids since they told me you CID guys were involved. We will send you a copy of the autopsy report as soon as it is typed." The doctor handed a packet of photos to Danny. They showed about what he had expected.

He thanked the doctor, and took his coffee with him down the corridor to the Graves Registration office. He walked in without knocking.

"You still here?" he said to the Corporal on duty, his old friend from his first tour in-country, Benito

Pena of East LA, California. It was their standing joke. Pena had continually extended his tour since then and had never really gone home except for leave. Danny had told him he was crazy. Pena said he liked the money and that *el barrio* was still *el barrio* and that at least in Nam he could legally go about armed to the teeth.

"Yo, I love it, man", Benito flashed a smile, "and I get my own jeep."

"You could also become your own customer poking around the bush for dead guys." Danny really worried about his friend pushing his luck far beyond where it should have run out.

Benito got serious.

"You know what they told us in Boot Camp, we don't leave no Marines behind."

"What about the one you took to the morgue tonight, what was the rush?"

"Man", Benito scowled, "that morgue has gotten weird in the last few months. Some congressman from your home town, The Bronx, made a complaint that dead guys from the New York area were not being sent home quick enough making it tough on their relatives who are his voters. So now you get a dead guy from greater New York, you got to expedite the whole operation and they take him into a special room and they got two or three special dudes to handle the New York guys. They shoot him up with the embalming juice and they got him on the very next C-130 out of here and on the way back to The World, just like that. It's weird."

"And the guy you brought there tonight?" Danny asked.

"Was from Brooklyn, that's my point Danny, the morgue guy who worked on him told me there was a flight out at 0330 and that Hill would be on it. That congressman must have some pull."

Danny squinted at his Seiko. It was 0410.

Newby entered the little office, greeted Benito and spoke to Danny.

"The sirens we heard before were a false alarm, no rocket attack. But some of the people in the living area jumped into the bunkers and one of them found the murder weapon in a bunker in row G, back by the swamp and turned it in at the CP. They checked the serial number against the arsenal list. It was issued to Todd all right, it was his rifle. It still had three rounds in it; one in the chamber and two in the magazine. Oh, yeah, the '16 with the Starlight Scope has turned up on the stand in the CP where it's supposed to be."

The magazine of the M-16 rifle held 20 rounds, but when issued to Marines in the Wing orders were to fill them with no more than 18 rounds so that the magazine spring would not deteriorate over time causing a possible malfunction in combat.

Marines good or bad, drunk, sober, or drugged up, thought Danny will follow orders when it comes to keeping their rifles ready for action. I could confiscate every magazine in the Wing and I bet every one would have 18 and not 20 rounds and Todd's rifle had three rounds still in it when they found it.

He said a hasty goodbye to Benito, took Newby by the arm and headed for the jeep. Danny drove and took the quickest route to the living area, barely slowing for the US military check points and speeding through the even more laid-back ones manned by the South Vietnamese troops.

"You are going to get us shot!" Newby choked.

"Maybe" said Danny, "Tell me what you were going to say about the duty camera when Trevor interrupted us when we were on the way back to the hootch where the guy got shot."

Newby did and Danny drove even faster. The CID jeep had had the forty mile per hour governor removed from the engine.

Danny's mind raced and he felt the urge to hear some sounds. He steered with one hand and pulled his Wollensack cassette player from his pack behind the front seat. He then realized that he had left his tapes in his hootch, remembered Hill's

tapes in the laundry bag and told Newby to see what he could find.

Newby squinted at one cassette after another in the dim pre-dawn light.

“They’re all copies but they’re labeled”, he said, “Alright! Hendrix!”

He popped the tape in the player, hit the button and turned up the volume on the opening riffs of *Purple Haze*. Danny and Newby started to sing along, the breeze whipping into their faces around the windshield of the racing jeep.

The music stopped suddenly and was replaced by a quivering, whispering voice

They listened to the remainder of the tape and Danny floored the gas peddle.

After a quick stop at the living area Security CP he drove back to hooch E-10, dismounted the jeep and bounded up onto the roof. The awakening occupants moaned, groaned and cursed. Danny clumped over to the single bullet hole and sighted down into it at a particular angle. He hopped down entered the hooch and found the hole in the screening of Hill’s cube he had missed the night before. He went out the back door and he and Newby took the duty evidence kit into the bunker on the left which served hooch F-10. They found what they were looking for.

"This new epoxy stuff sets up quick" said Newby.

In a few minutes they were driving back to the CID compound after a brief stop in the officer's quarters to awaken and speak with Colonel Johansen, the Squadron Commander.

They pulled up in front of the hooch in the CID compound where Capt. Paranza lived alone, just as the sun cleared the horizon beyond the South China Sea and the first blast of morning heat came to Viet Nam.

Danny and Newby walked in without knocking and turned on the lights. Paranza awoke groggy and then cursing. His beefy face immediately turned livid.

"O'Connor! What the ...!" he coughed and choked in rage.

"You wanted the report first thing in the morning", said Danny. He didn't bother to say 'sir'. He took a sheet from a yellow pad in his pack, scrawled on it with a black marker and handed it to Paranza who was still on his back in his rack.

Paranza looked at it and sat up swinging his bare feet onto the floor. He read it aloud; ‘Paranza killed Hill’.

“I always knew you were crazy. O'Connor. You Bronx Irish drunken grunt maniac. You have finally screwed yourself. Newby, you are my witness ...”

"No", said Danny, "Newby is my witness. A little while ago he told me that when he first started to drive over to the Sergeants Club to get me after the shooting, he had gotten part way there when he reached into the back seat under the poncho to make sure he had the duty camera. He didn't find it though. He found the M-16 with the Starlight Scope and then he knew he had taken your jeep from in front of the CP by mistake since you take the Scope every night to try and peep naked nurses."

Paranza snorted.

Danny continued.

“Newby turned right around and returned your jeep to the CP and took duty jeep. They had been parked together as usual it was a simple mistake, but he was glad that you were back at the murder scene at the time or you would have jumped all over him. The guys in the CP, of course, wouldn't tell on him, but they will verify now that Newby had taken your jeep by mistake. So later you knew exactly where the M-16 with the Starlight Scope was, it was in the back of your jeep. You just made a big deal so that if it was discovered, that IT and not Todd's rifle had been used to kill Hill you would not be associated with it but rather 'whoever took it without signing for it'. Once you had expedited Hill's body out of country, you had no trouble sneaking Scope rifle back into the CP,

with what? Maybe under your poncho folded across your arm? Atley now has the Starlight secured. He noticed you came into the CP during the rocket attack false alarm with your poncho on your arm. Did you arrange the false alarm too? No don't answer, it doesn't make any difference. You did arrange for Hill to put Todd, drunk and stoned as he was, up to trying to kill Schmidt, by telling him that he was a CID snitch. A fact that only a few of us knew. But all that shooting was just to cover you crouching in the bunker of hooch F-10 and sighting through the Starlight scope into Hill's cube. You couldn't be sure how it would go down, but all you needed was a clear shot at Hill and then you could use your pals in the Army morgue to get the bod out of country real fast. No don't say it."

Danny took an empty 5.56mm casing from his breast pocket and Newby pulled three epoxy casts from his pack.

"Ballistic tests on this shell will prove that it came from the Starlight rifle. When Todd's rifle was found it still had three rounds in it and none of the fifteen he fired hit Hill. The round from this casing, the nineteenth round, is the one that killed him and then traveled on to put a hole in the opposite side of the roof. These casts which we took from behind the flash wall of the bunker where we found the shell, will match your boots and even the knee of your trousers where you knelt to fire."

"And why", Paranza tried to act disinterested, scratching himself under the poncho liner blanket covering his lap, "would I kill, what's his name? Hill?"

"You killed your cousin, Dominick Hill of Brooklyn, New York because ..., but here let him tell you himself."

Danny clicked on the cassette player in his pack and Jimmie Hendrix's mad guitar rocked the hooch. The music stopped abruptly replaced by the frightened whispers of a man on the edge of sanity.

"Tony Paranza, you rat bastard, if you are hearing this I am dead, but at least you are locked up,

because somehow I am going to get this to some kind of cops some place besides here in Nam where you own the freaking EI Cid. It was bad enough you used your pull with your congressman pal to get me put on active duty and shipped out of the reserve unit at Fort Totten in Queens so that you could make me help you to start mailing the smack back to The World through the Wing Post Office. What, you greedy son of a bitch, sending it back in the dead guys bodies wasn't quick enough for you? Not enough guys dying fast enough for you? No, now you make me set up this jerk Todd to shoot Schmidt, because he was about to find out that he wasn't just getting evidence on the local dealers but on your operation too. This is too much. Sure, I was mad at you for bringing me over here but I didn't really mean what I said the other night. I was drunk I would never turn you in, we are family" The words disappeared in nearly silent sobs, and then continued, "I'm afraid, but if you are hearing this you killed me even after I did what you said and set up Schmidt, so I'm telling the whole story ..."

The whole story Hill spilled into the tape was that Paranza, a former New York City police detective who had been quietly retired due to his involvement with known gamblers, had used his connection with the Bronx congressman to be activated from his Marine reserve unit in Brooklyn. He was a gunnery sergeant in that unit but, had been given a limited duty commission as a CID captain. His request to be sent to Nam was helped along by the same congressman, who was taking a hefty cut of the heroin smuggling operation he had helped set up in collusion with a few of the Army morgue personnel in Da Nang, and some of the personnel in the graves registration unit at Fort Totten in Queens. All names were named, dates and places were referenced and Dominick Hill concluded with a harshly whispered; "Tony if you killed me, I hope you burn in Hell!"

"Modern communications are amazing", said Danny, "we stopped to see the Colonel on the way over and he hooked up with some of those really secure channels relayed up on Monkey Mountain back to the Pentagon. He has already had your friends at the Army morgue busted, and any time now your friends back in the good old USA,

including the congressman, should be having the same experience. So, how do you like my report Captain Paranza?"

Paranza smiled.

"You know", he said, "how they say a hand grenade will blow in three to five seconds after you pull the pin and let go of the spoon? Did you ever time one of them?"

Paranza brought an olive drab painted fragmentation grenade up from under the blanket and never stopped smiling as he pulled the pin and flipped it over his shoulder. He moved his thumb and the lever on the side of the grenade, the spoon, released with a sound like a Zippo lighter being opened; CLINK!

"One thousand one..." Paranza counted softly.

Danny and Newby turned into each other and pirouetted in an insane dance, squeezing back through the door they had entered. They fell down the steps arms and legs entangled rolling in the sand.

"One thousand and two!" Paranza screamed. He still sat on his rack in the hootch.

Danny and Newby separated jumped up and sprinted across the compound. "One thousand and three!" Paranza bellowed behind them.

They each ran a few more steps and dropped to the ground.

"One thousand and Fou ..." BOOM!

Half the hootch flew apart in a cloud flame and slate gray smoke.

The ground shook under them and splinters of plywood, shreds of sheet metal and globs of pink goo rained down on Danny and Newby.

In a little while Danny stood and helped Newby up. They picked up their evidence packs and looked back to where the remainder of the hooch stood.

Danny spit the sand from his mouth.

"Dude didn't even have the courtesy to use the bunker", he said.

Later, in the heat of South East Asian high noon, when the paper work was done, and they had showered and put on clean uniforms, Danny and Newby let themselves into the Sergeants Club. They turned on the air conditioner and fired up the 16mm projector. They loaded it up with a newly released film. They had acquired the film at the Wing Post Office as the can it came in was one of those that needed to be inspected for contraband. Since it was too early to start drinking they each had a Grape Nehi as they sat in the cool dark and watched the first animated characters and listened to John Lennon sing about the town where he was born and the man there who sailed the seas in a yellow submarine.

"Cool," said Newby.

"Cool," said Danny.

Copyright 2008 W.H. Payne

The Press at Windswept Farm Saugerties, NY



www.windsweptpress.com