
Robert H. Fowler, Jr.
VIA AIR MAIL
CORREO AEREO
PAR AVION
MAIL CALL
FREE
VIETNA
GULF OF TONKIN
Red River Delta
Bach Long Vy I. (Nightingale)
Hainan Strait
Haik'ou
Ch'iungshan
Tungshan
Wenchiao
Hsinhsing
Kuangtsun
Hsinchou
Tanhsien (Nata)
Linkao
Ch'engmai
Tingan
Chiayün
Hosheng
Ch'angchiang
Nam Dinh
Thai Binh
Ninh Binh
Lac Quan
Van Ly
Phat Diem
Ha Trung
Hau Loc
Thanh Hoa
Sam Son
Tinh Gia
Me Island
Bien Son I.
Phu Duc
Phu Dien
Cua Lo
Vinh
Bai Duc
Da Nang (Tourane)
Da Nang Bay
Cham Island
Hoi An
Thang Binh
Que Son
Tam Ky
Point Nam Tram
Bo Bai I.
Re Island
Cape Batangan
Binh Son
Quang Ngai
Mo Duc
Duc Pho
Dien Truong
An Lao
Hoai Nhon
Phu My
Trau Island
An Nhon
Qui Nhon
Lang Mai Bay
Gambir I.
Song Cau
Tuy Hoa
Cape Varella
Crescent Group
PARACEL
ISLANDS
Pattle I.
Money I.
Triton Island
Phu Loc
Hieu Duc
Dai Loc
Ben Hien Pi Karung
Thuong Duc
Thau Bon
Pimah
Hiep Duc
Tien Phuoc
Hau Duc
Tra Bong
Son Tinh
Son Ha
Nghia Hanh
Minh Long
Ba To
Gia Vuc
Chuong Nghia
Dak Sut
Tou Morong
Dak To
Kontum
Polei Krong
Hoai An
Van Cong
Vinh Thanh
Kannack
An Tuc
Binh Khe
Plei Ta Nangle
Tuy Phuoc
Van Canh
Dong Xuan
Tuy An
Xa Ninh
Son Hoa
Phu Duc
Plei Xop
Tram
Plei Djereng
Pleiku
Plei Mrong
Le Thanh
Duc Co
Phum Kompadou
Plei Me
Cheo Reo
Buon Thoat
Buon Brieng
Buon Ho
Dat Hieu
Kaduat Mang
Dak Gle
Dak Pek
Thac Hiet
Kamane
Chavane
Ban Phone
Ban Thateng
Ban Lao Ngam
Saravane
Chakeuil Tay
Ban Kadap
Ban Houei Mun
Ban Tamprill
Ben Hien Pi Karung
Lakhonpheng
Souvanna Khili
Bolovens
Pakse
Pak Song
Phoune Thong
Champassak
Attopeu
Phiafay
Done Talat
Ban Khampho
Muong May
Ban Tasseing
Kong My
Mekong
Phapho
Phum La Ok
Siem Pang
Khong
Khone
Virachei
Phum Thuy
Boung Long
Phum Talas
Chhep
Thalabarivat
Phum Leuong
Stung Treng
Srepok
Lomphat
Andaung Pech
Kong
Sre Koki
Kohnieh
Klem
Njrik
Chu Mnang
Kompong Trabeck
Kompong Poutrea
Siembauk
Bang Hieng
Ban Taphane
Muong Wapi
Done Sedone
Souvanna Khili
Muong Phine
Muong Fai
Ban Na Pha
Boualaph
Vin Vu
Haxay
Na Kay
Linh
Cua Lo
Dong Giam
Thi Long
Ha Trung
Chu
Ma
Ninh Binh
Ho Quan
Nam Dinh
Thai Binh
Lot'o Sha (Sheldrake I.)
Maich'en
Haian
Tenglou Chiao
Ch'ichou Ch'i (Taya Is.)
T'ungku Chiao (Tonk
Chiachi)
100 Fathoms
Plateau
Trường Sơn
Annamite Cordillera
SOUTH VIET NAM

MAIL CALL

Robert H. Fowler, Jr.


CONSUMMATE PROFESSIONALS
3
BELLEAU WOOD
VIETNAM
5
GET SOME

FOREWORD

During the Vietnam conflict, over 58,000 men and women lost their lives. Many of those brave souls had volunteered for service. President John F. Kennedy had inspired many of my generation with the words, "*Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country."* Young men and women were answering the call, and doing what they considered honorable.

"He that outlives this day, and comes safe home,
Will stand a tip-toe when this day is named,
And rouse him at the name of Crispian.
He that shall live this day, and see old age,
Will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbors,
And say 'To-morrow is Saint Crispian.'
Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars,
And say 'These wounds I had on Crispin's day.'
Old men forget: yet all shall be forgot,
But he'll remember, with advantages,
What feats he did that day. Then shall our names,
Familiar in his mouth as household words
Harry the King, Bedford and Exeter,
Warwick and Talbot, Salisbury and Gloucester
Be in their flowing cups freshly remembered.
This story shall the good man teach his son;
And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by,
From this day to the ending of the world,
But we in it shall be remembered
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition;
And gentlemen in England now a-bed
Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,
And hold their manhood's cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day."

William Shakespeare: Henry V, Act IV, Scene iii

This book is dedicated to my mother, and every mother that sent her son off to war. She has my love always. In her own way, she was a hero.

My Mom and me

I

MY MOM IS GOING TO KILL ME!

Whoa, how in the name of "Anchors Away" did I get here? Here I am shooting down a runway from Evansville, Indiana. The jet was catapulting me to a war on the other side of the world. Should I pinch myself? Is this really happening to me? The jet levels off into a clear blue sky, floats above the clouds, and a troubled world below. I drift off silently in my thoughts: I find myself back in school at Evansville College. I am knee deep in my studies. I am pursuing a minor in psychology, a double major of Sigma Phi Epsilon (my newly pledged fraternity), and girls. Regrettably, I am a tall person, and knee deep was not deep enough to avoid a solid D average, and loss of my college deferment. "Greetings, salutations, and surprise, my friend! Enclosed, please find your 1A notice." I was about to be drafted. What do I do now? My Mom is going to kill me for sure.

What to do? What to do? I had to talk to somebody, and figure out how to let Mom know what I've done this time. I can only think of one person who can help me out with Mom. I enlist the help of my father. We settle down at the kitchen table (the board room of most families) to conceive our strategy. Unfortunately, I am in great health. So, getting a 4F classification is out of the question. My father was a veteran of WWII. He had a cache of medals that testified to his heroism. Even he did not want to face Mom without some sort of plan. We both understood that going to war was one thing, and facing Mom was another. "Why don't you enlist in the Navy or the Air Force? That way, if you have to go to Vietnam at least you will be fairly safe." A strategy had been hatched, and a plan put into action. My father's thinking made sense to me. If I joined the Air Force, I would be on an Air Force base, or if I joined the Navy, I would be on a ship. Either one would keep me out of the jungle, and away from the people who wanted to shoot me. Now, please understand that other fathers, and sons across the country were also sitting at their kitchen table, and having similar ideas. That is why when I contacted the Air Force recruiter, he told me that there was a waiting list that would not expire until sometime into the next century. The Navy had a similar story, but not wanting to lose all the fine young men to the Army, they had created a 120 day program for which, oddly enough, I qualified.

Recruiters are really foxes disguised as humans, and they are trained to handle young males with grace and skill. With a warm handshake, a coke, and a picture of two good-looking Navy nurses in a glossy brochure, he had me. I volunteered to be a Hospital Corpsman. That's right, I said volunteered which I had been warned against. But what the heck, I was going to be working in a hospital with all those attractive Navy nurses. That is exactly what I told my Mom except I left out the bit about the attractive nurses.

As I had paged through the Navy's recruitment catalog, I spotted a corpsman standing between two nurses of the female variety. Like I said, I was sold. I must admit that the recruiter didn't try to hide anything, and I did notice (in small print) this sentence: "Navy Corpsman are occasionally assigned to Fleet Marine Service."

Now I ask you, reader, "What would you think that sentence would mean?" Any first year college student knows that the word "fleet" means a lot of ships, and the word "marine" is also a nautical term. So, I assumed that it meant I would occasionally have to go out on ships, leaving the warmth and comfort of the Navy hospital. Wanting to make sure I had all my bases covered, I asked the recruiter if I was correct about the definition of "Fleet Marine." He smiled, showing his sharp fangs and said, "Sure!" It was not until I had completed my boot camp training that I found out that I would be assigned to the Marines. After I completed a medical course at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina, I was going to be with the Marines in Vietnam. In short, I would be a Marine. I would go where they went, dress like they dressed, and do what they did. And Marines went to Vietnam where they got shot. I was not going to be on a safe ship. The strategy that my father and I had hatched over the kitchen table to spare me from the wrath of my mother had been (to use a nautical term) SUNK!

II

ON MY WAY

"Sir, would you like something to drink?" Back on the jet a pretty, young stewardess was trying to jolt me back into the present. A drink? No, I don't want a drink. What I really want is a do over! I want a mulligan! I want an Air Force Recruiter! Do you know there was not one single Air Force Medic that served with the Marines in Vietnam?

After one layover in St. Louis and what seemed like a way-too-short time in the air, the jet began to sink back to earth. We were told to fasten our seat belts and prepare to land in San Francisco. "Have a nice stay, sir." said the stewardess automatically as we walked off the plane. However, this was not a vacation, I was going to war the way they do it in the 20th century, via a commercial flight. This would be the first of many surreal experiences that would envelope my life over the next twelve months. After landing in San Francisco, I was instructed to get onto an Air Force bus. There I sat, a Sailor in a Marine uniform, on my way to Travis Air Force Base where I would await the next plane that would fly me to my war in Vietnam.

I did not really know much about Vietnam or what it was all about at this point in my life. I had seen the news reports and had met Marines who had been in Vietnam. The Marines I met did not want to talk about their experiences in Vietnam,but I could tell it had made a profound impact on them. Many were suffering from what would later be called PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder)—a condition neither they nor I was familiar with at the time. My jungle training was at good old Montford Point, which was part of the Camp Lejeune Marine Corps Base. The area had been built during WWII but now was being utilized for jungle training. I was taught about booby traps, grass huts that could be housing the enemy, and bamboo sticks that would threaten to impale you with dung covered points. It was drilled into me that the enemy could be very inventive and good fighters. After receiving training from the Marines and the Navy, my mind was steeled. I was ready to face what lay ahead. In the twelve months that followed, I would heed those instructions and learn the value of the training given me. Part of that instruction was to follow orders.

Marines are taught to be single minded about completing missions. Give them instruction and point them in the right direction and they will do or die to complete the assignments. Before I boarded the plane, my mother gave her instruction. She looked me square in the eye and said, "Don't forget to write." I would follow that decree with the single-mindedness of a Marine on a mission. I began to write almost as soon as I got off the plane. In San Francisco I purchased some post cards, scratched out little notes, and dropped them in the mail. After all, my mom was my first drill sergeant.

The bus dropped me off me at Travis Air Force Base for a brief stay before the next leg of my journey to my all-expense-paid designation. Before catching the next plane, I was treated to "**** on a shingle" which is chipped beef a' la white gravy served on toast. I liked this quintessential military fare. I was glad to get a meal in before resuming my journey. The chow hall was huge and filled with guys just like me. I was pleasantly surprised to run into Harvey Grey, a friend that I had made at Camp Lejeune. Harvey and I would go off to Vietnam together, but sadly I would be the only one who came back.

After we ate, we were instructed to board yet another bus to catch another plane. I expected to board one of the military transport planes that was parked along the sides of several runways. I was getting ready for a long, uncomfortable flight. Surprise again. The bus stopped in front of a TWA commercial liner. I had a fleeting thought that maybe, this war would not be too hard to handle after all. My father had gone off to war in a crowded troop ship, bouncing off cold waves in the North Atlantic. I was flying a comfortable jet liner to my war. I thought that we had certainly come a long way. Once again, we shot down the runway and jumped into the sky heading toward a war that was proving to be much different than what I had anticipated. "Ding, Ding, Ding," a chime interrupted my thoughts. "Please fasten your seat belts." It was followed by a little talk from the stewardess on how to use the O2 mask and where the emergency exits were. I began to wonder what my Dad would have thought about having a stewardess on his troop ship.

The day that I left for Vietnam.
Debby, Me, Mom & Pokey

III

OKINAWA DREAMING

The flight from San Francisco to Honolulu took about five hours. We stopped at Wake Island for refueling, and then on to Okinawa. I sent postcards home on the way to war, which seemed a strange thing to do at the time.

We arrived in Okinawa late at night, with a misty type of rain falling. The rain added humidity to the warm night air (not unlike a sultry August night in southern Indiana). There seemed to be so much confusion—lots of troops moving around, orders being given, and jeeps and trucks everywhere. Eventually, it was time to get checked in. We were issued jungle boots, uniforms, and then sent on our way to fill out forms. Finally, there came a chance to hit the rack (a term that we lovingly called our cots) and to sneak in a little shut eye. Everything was so new and different; it was hard to get any sleep. But I finally drifted away for some much-needed rest. The next day after breakfast, they herded us together to fill out more forms that named our beneficiaries. I don't know what my friend Harvey was thinking, but my thoughts went something like this: CRAP!! This was much too serious a business. This was too real, and I was beginning to get more anxious about the whole going-to-war scene.

In my newly-issued clothes, I really looked like a Marine. According to the Geneva Convention, I was not supposed to be fired on. Unfortunately, I also had been told that when everything hit the fan, I was a number one target. There would be no big red cross to let everyone know that I was the corpsman. I would look just like every other Marine except that I would be the one running around with a medical bag which we called a Unit One. When someone was hurt, the Marines would yell out, and usually at the top of their lungs, "Corpsman Up!" I would be off to make what we called a "House Call." I sure hoped the enemy was aware of the Geneva Convention.

27 March 1968

Dear Mom:

I'm in Okinawa now. We got here at Camp Hansen at 08:30 A.M. I'm fine, except a little tired, so don't worry.

You always, always tell your mother not to worry, even though you know she will. Sometimes I just shake my head in amazement. I mean, I put some things in those letters that would scare paint off a wall. Then I would say, "Don't worry." After becoming a parent, I learned that parents, especially mothers, always worry. That is in their job description. Good Grief! The nightmares I must have given my mom with some of my letters followed by the phrase, "Don't worry."

I sent you and Debby a post card at every one of our stops along the way: Travis AFB, Wake Island, Honolulu, hope you got them all.

Since I had been instructed to write often; I immediately began to spew out correspondence, just like a machine gun. It was years later that I learned that my mother and bride-to-be had saved every one of my letters, and postcards. I suppose holding onto the letters was a way of having me there with them.

Oh, I met Harvey Grey at Travis, so we finally got together.

Harvey was a friend of mine from my tour of duty at the 2nd Force Service Regiment in Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. He was a deep thinker, and a sincere young man who was both excited, and scared to be going off to war. Harvey was a minister's son, and an overall great guy. We shared many an experience while at Camp Lejeune. He was with me the night at a little bar in Swansboro when I learned that you should wash your hands before you go to the urinal after eating several jalapeño peppers from a jar. Somehow, seeing a familiar face made us feel a little more at ease as we left for our war. How's that old saying go, "Misery loves company?"

I'm running out of time so I better end now. I'll write again next chance I get. Don't worry.

All the men with me loved to write, and receive mail. Mail call was almost a religious experience for us. We treasured every letter that we received. Mail was the way we maintained some sort of sanity in the insanity of war. It anchored us to a world that we left behind. We were not supposed to keep our letters for fear that they might fall into enemy hands. But some of us would hang on to a special letter, especially from a girlfriend or wife. I kept a love letter from my fiancée in my boot. Letters usually smelled of perfume when they first arrived. We would pass them around so everyone could take a whiff and remember what was waiting for us at home. Now, that may sound strange, but we smelled badly and the faint flowery smell was somehow intensified. We only bathed once a month or so, usually in a dirty river or pond. We knew we smelled, but we liked it. Being smelly saved us from bugs. We also were told that Charlie (the enemy) could smell us, but I always had my doubts. Mail was so important that if someone was not receiving any mail from back home, we would match them up with a friend or ask someone back home to find someone that would write to them. It was best for them, from a psychological point of view, to hear from somebody back in the real world. I remember when our radioman for the platoon was dumped by his girlfriend back home. He received a "Dear John" letter or what we would call a "Jody" letter. I was able to write to Debby, and she had her roommate write to him. They corresponded for a while, and I really believe it helped him get through that time.

Back Home in Indiana

Dad

My Brother, My Girl, My Sister & My Dog

Mom

IV

LUCKY LIMA

As the plane landed at Da Nang Airport, I heard a few mortar rounds go off. I was thinking: someone is shooting at me already, and I am not even off the plane. Flying into Da Nang was surreal experience. As the big jet began descending, I gaped at the country that I would inhabit for the next year. The view could have been used as an ad for a tourist destination. Beautiful azure water washed up onto great, sandy beaches. When the jet did a slow turn, it allowed me to see some more. The picture-perfect scene changed. There were rows of shack type dwellings, perfect green squares (rice paddies), and pock marked circles which were created by artillery shelling and bombings. I did not know it at the time, but if I had lifted my gaze a little higher, I would have seen the An Hoa Basin, the area that would be my home for my year in Vietnam.

Da Nang was the largest military base in the north. Mainly an air facility, it was the busiest military air base in the world at the time. Both Marine and Army units were also based there, along with ARVN's (South Vietnam's Army). Like every military town, there were bars and girls (many were supposedly off limits, but the military men were up for the challenge). Da Nang also had hospital facilities. Since it was a deep-water port, there were many ships, including the United States Navy. Da Nang had grown into the second largest city in Vietnam. The only practical avenue of approach to Da Nang was Thuong Duc corridor that funneled east from Laos. It included lush agricultural flat lands and numerous villages. It was the An Hoa Basin where I was heading. It was the breadbasket for the area. For this reason, it was a hot-bed of enemy activity. An Hoa was the westernmost Marine base in Southern I Corps. It had a 3000-foot air strip, hard-surfaced helicopter landing pad, refueling station, and an artillery cantonment, along with all the logistical support elements that went with such an operation. It also contained lots and lots of dust in the summer and lots and lots of rain during monsoons, which generated lots and lots of mud. An Hoa took more incoming shells than any other American base in I Corps, and with that statistic comes another-- more casualties than any other battle zone between 1966 and 1971. The road from Da Nang to An Hoa was little more than a dirt lane, hard packed during the dry season and a sea of mud during the monsoon. This road was so dangerous that it had acquired the nickname of "Thunder Road." This was due to all the many mines planted there, one of which would mess up my ears later.

When preparing to go to Vietnam, you are given all types of advice from your family and friends and other experienced vets. After my experience in the recruiter's office, I took to heart the advice, "NEVER VOLUNTEER FOR ANYTHING." This advice would come into play on my very first day in-country. After landing at Da Nang, I was instructed to report to a huge quonset hut. A quonset hut, made popular in World War II, was a half-circled building. The quonset was filled with Marines trying to figure out the game plan. In this seemingly chaotic swirl of busyness, we were there to receive our orders and find out what unit we would be joining. Over the loudspeaker I heard, "Does anyone wish to volunteer for recon?" Reconnaissance (scoping out an enemy's position) did not fit into my plan of action to stay alive. With words of advice still ringing in my ears from several sources, I kept my hands and feet firmly planted and stood in line. One thing the military has is lines. Eventually, that line gave me up and I got my assignment. I was told to catch a chopper to Phu Bai. My new home had a base located 20 miles north of Da Nang, and I was a long way from there. I was a Hospital Corpsman, which was rumored to be in short supply with the Marines. I expected someone from my company would pick me up. Not the case, I was told I needed to hitch a ride. How do you hitch a ride on a chopper? I was not taught this in any training that I had been given back in the states. Glad to be temporarily out of a line, I enjoyed the pleasant temperature, and the clear blue sky as I trekked over to the air facility. I found a resupply chopper that was headed for Phu Bai, asked for a ride, and off I went.

April 03, 1968

Dear Mom,

Today seems to be getting a little warmer. I started indoctrination school; it lasts 4-5 days. When this is over, I will go into the BUSH. Things are real quiet here, it's just like camping out.

That's right I really said "camping out." Boy, would that change, and soon. For some strange reason I thought my mother needed to know that her son was maintaining good hygiene in this war – I drew her a picture of a homemade shower that we had put together.

April 04, 1968

Dear Mom,

Well, another day gone. The temp. is real nice today. One of the guys has a camera so I had him take my picture in front of the shower I told you about.

What was it about that shower? Could be that the temperature would change from pleasant spring weather to hot, humid, and sometimes scorching days. Most days during the summer would make it above 100 degrees with humidity in the 90's.

April 06, 1968

Dear Mom,

Well, tomorrow we'll be going into the field. I'm going to be assigned to Lima Company. They say Lima Company is a pretty good outfit. It's called Lucky Lima. I feel fine, just dirty (I miss that shower). I imagine that I will be pretty busy. Don't worry if you don't hear from me for a while.

"So, Doc, you're going out to Lima, they're down the road at Hai Van Pass... guarding a bridge or something. You're going to have to hitch a ride on the mail truck." Had I known how important it was to be able to hitch a ride in this war, I would have exercised my thumb more. It wasn't long before I found myself bouncing down the road with some other new guys, and a bunch of mail. We lumbered along, passing banana trees, grass huts, and water buffalo, standing stoically in rice paddies. Strange-looking old women in what looked like silk pajamas were riding on scooters, and bikes. Later, I learned that those old women were called Mama Sans by the military, and they were not old at all. They chewed something called beetle nut which made their teeth black, and in turn made the women appear older. Little children ran along the side of the truck saying something that sounded like, "You souvenir me, chop chop." "Souvenir me, chop chop" was a way to beg for C-Rations, food, or candy. I never was quite sure if the children really were hungry, or if they kept what we gave them to be sold later. It was almost impossible not to give them something, with their cute round faces and big brown eyes looking up at us. Sadly, you never knew for certain whether they were about to toss a hand grenade into the truck as they begged for food.

As the truck wound its way over the mountain road, which I later discovered was HWY 1, I was stunned at the view that lay before me. Lucky Lima was encamped in the mountains overlooking Da Nang Harbor. The motor of the truck strained as we traveled the steep road until we crested the mountain. To my left was a plateau with a bunker which was company headquarters in the field for Lima. I was told to hop out and report to the Captain, which I did with wide-eyed wonder at what my future would hold for me.

April 12, 1968

Dear Mom,

Yesterday we all came back to the rear (Phu Bai) for a four-day rest. A chance to get our gear cleaned and take a shower. We also get to put on clean utilities. Lima Company had recently got back from Hue City. They took us all to the dentist also to get our teeth checked, no cavities.

April 13, 1968

Dear Mom,

Did you ever get those post cards I sent from our stops on the way to Okinawa? Yes, I got new jungle utilities and jungle boots.

I was wearing them in the picture I had sent home.

Yes, my fruit cake made it all the way; it's gone now. Didn't hold out very long (bet nobody knows just how much Marines like fruit cake). Glad to hear that you got the new power mower, you needed one for a while. Too bad about Sandy, any news as to why the wedding was called off? No, I haven't lost my watch.

Already my mother was sending me boxes of all sorts of things, from fruit cake to wrist watches. No one can outfit a Marine like a Mom. To this day I don't understand why my Mom sent me a fruitcake, in April, to Vietnam of all places. Also, for some reason, it was particularly important to my Mom that I know what time it was. She gave me a wrist watch at a very early age and kept them coming all through my life.

Could you see if you can find something in the stores called START, it's an orange drink that has vitamins in it.

I started sending a shopping list with almost every letter that I wrote, as did all the guys. I also learned early on not to mention that I needed vitamins, or that my health was in peril.

Nothing much is going on right now, although we did come under a rocket attack last night. Not one person was injured. Today was a pretty busy day; we gave shots to the entire company. I had my first shower in four days. Today was the first day I got mail; it took your letters 5 days to reach me. How long does it take mine to reach you?

To date, my wartime career had largely consisted of getting new clothes, going to the dentist, giving Marines their shots, and going on long hikes in the beautiful mountains above Da Nang Harbor. I also learned to sleep in a hole dug in a side of a hill. My first hillside hotel that I shared was with a machine gunner who would later help to save my life. Not much had happened other than routine patrols into the mountains. There was no enemy in sight. They had gone into hiding because of the tremendous defeat they had just suffered in the Tet Offensive. Slowly but surely, I was getting to know the men of Lima. My name had been changed-- I was now "DOC." The routine of the military began to settle in as easy as the misty rain that was falling.

V

CULINARY WONDERS & CARE PACKAGES

April 23, 1968

Dear Mom,

We just got back from a two-day recon up into the mountains. We climbed up about 800 to 900 feet; it was rough with that pack on your back, needless to say. I'm pretty dirty too, haven't had a chance to shave in two or three days. We took eight ARVN's with us, that's the Vietnamese Army. They're pretty interesting and also funny. Most ARVN soldiers look like kids, even though they're older. I haven't gotten any mail for about 1 ½ weeks now. I imagine it will catch up with me sooner or later. I thought of some stuff you could put in my next care package:

1. Kool Aid (anything to kill the halazone taste in the water).
2. Garlic Salt (anything to kill the c-rations taste)
3. Pepperoni & Sausage
4. Cheese
5. Hot sauce
Anything else you can think of. It's starting to get pretty hot here.

I had been drinking stream water treated with halazone pills, and eating C-Rations. The military called them Meals, Combat, Ready. Soldiers had other endearing names for them. C-Rations were the fuel for our furnace. They were what we ate 90% of the time in the bush and even in the rear. All of us carried several boxes. Freeze dried meals were just coming out, but were not available to grunts that were out in the field. Each box contained canned meat, fruit/vegetable, and various goodies, such as: cake, candy, pepper, salt, cigarettes, and toilet paper. C-Rations had a long shelf life. The first one that I ate was packaged in the 40's. C-Rations were also a type of currency. A tin of pound cake and peaches could get you a pack of smokes. Dining in the military was a lot like playing the lottery. Sometimes you got a winner, but most of the time you didn't. On rare occasions, we would get food that was prepared by cooks or ice cream that was sent out in a helicopter. Everyone looked forward to receiving care packages from home. Hot sauce, cookies, and food from the States made it possible to eat C-Rations. Care packages not only came with food, but other items that the folks back home considered necessary. My great aunt sent me a pocket size *New Testament* that also included a few Psalms. I would often read the 23rd Psalm before going into battle to help me manage my stress and fear. "THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD; I SHALL NOT WANT..."

VI

GROUND POUNDER

My platoon, the 2nd, had moved down the road a bit and my involvement in the conflict began to pick up. We set up in a South Vietnamese Army Compound. We started going with them up the mountains on a regular basis. On one of these patrols, I was first confronted with an enemy that was fast, agile, and very hairy-- the rock ape. Some think that rock apes are conjured-up animals, but there were many reported sightings by U.S. troops and the Vietnamese armies. All I knew was that large rocks stung when they were hurled at you. The first time I heard a loud thud, I thought someone had flung a grenade.

Often, We worked closely with the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam.) We would have several of their soldiers with us on our patrols. They were a collection of ragtag fighters. They were just like children playing war except they were equipped with real guns and bullets. The typical soldier was about 5 ft. tall, and probably weighed in at 100 lbs. They knew the area better than we did. It was helpful to have them on patrol with us. What amazed them most about us was not our modern weapons, not our technology, and not even our American size and strength. It was our facial hair. Sometimes, they would approach us just to feel our beards. Weird! Most men of Vietnam had little, if any, facial hair or hair on their bodies. On one patrol, we came upon a small waterfall and pond. After setting up a guard, the rest of us took off our clothes, and jumped in to clean up, and cool off. The ARVNs began pointing and laughing at our hairiness. They must have wondered about these strange men in their country.

Like the Marines, the ARVN would also test-fire weapons from time to time. On one such occasion, they pulled out an old WWII Browning Automatic Rife (BAR) to test fire. This is a big heavy weapon with a bi-pod on the end of the barrel. Developed in WWII, it probably weighed almost as much as the ARVN who was going to fire it. When the first ARVN took his turn, he squatted with the BAR resting safely in his crotch. The ARVN pulled the trigger, and the weapon fired. The rifle recoiled into his crotch, and knocked him painfully back about three feet. As he lay curled up on the ground in pain, his officer came running over, and read him the riot act. One didn't have to speak fluent Vietnamese to get the gist of the conversation. The officer decided to show him how to fire the weapon, and the same miserable results happened to the officer. The Marines laughed their heads off. While many of these ARVNs looked like children, they sadly died like men. They were deserted by their hairy friends later when the US pulled their troops out of Vietnam.

May 01, 1968

Dear Mom,
Sorry it has been so long since I've written, but we just got back down from another patrol up in the mountains. My mail is coming through good now, although I still haven't gotten my packages yet. The rain has been coming down here; I believe it's rained the last three days in a row.

I hadn't seen anything yet; monsoon season was still several months away.

They had us on alert to go back up to Hue, but it looks like we are going to stay here in the mountains. You and Debby keep asking me if I am getting enough to eat. Yes, I am. I don't know if I'll get another chance to write in the next couple days or so – HAPPY MOTHER'S DAY!

May 05, 1968

Dear Mom,

Guess what, I got my first package today. The one with 20 cans of Start and the magazines.

20 cans! Apparently, my mon thought I needed a lot of vitamin C. I was able to share with the platoon because there was no way I could carry around 20 cans of Start.

Last night was really hectic. They hit Da Nang and Saigon with rocket fire. We could see the rockets exploding in Da Nang from up here in the mountains. It's starting to get pretty hot; the bugs are really coming out, too. I have to go up the mountains on another recon patrol. I sure dread climbing up there in this heat. How about those peace talks, maybe they'll have some good results? Check in to see if I can vote this time, or not. I am going to vote for McCarthy.

May 07, 1968

Dear Mom:

It's starting to get pretty hot now, every day it gets closer to 100 around noon. I sleep on the ground most of the time. When we stay at the ARVN compound, I have a cot I sleep on.

In one of her letters, my Mom was worried about my sleeping arrangements. Funny what goes through a mother's mind when her son is halfway around the world in a war.

VII

ALLEN BROOK

I had yet to fire my M-16, other than to test-fire and practice. I had accidentally fired my 45 cal. handgun while cleaning it one day. This incident lent credence to the argument that perhaps corpsmen should not have weapons. The day finally arrived that we were being sent out on a big operation that already was in progress. The higher-ups had named this operation *Allen Brook* after the first Marine that was killed in action in the area. I was glad I never had an operation named after me.

We were sent back to Phu Bai to get resupplied, have a hot meal, and grab a shower. Being inexperienced, I didn't know that they were nice to you before they sent you into a bad situation. Getting ready for one of these events was a sight to see. Hustle and bustle, hurry and wait, and lines, don't forget the lines. We were all given C-rations, ammo, and plenty of stuff to carry on our backs. I stocked up on salt tablets, various medical supplies, and two extra canteens (I now carried four). All the trucks were brought in for the trip down HWY 1 to the area of the operation. Lucky Lima was loaded on the trucks, and off we went. I was a little nervous and curious all at the same time. This was my first big operation and I felt it would yield casualties. As the truck jolted along, thoughts raced through my head, "Would I freeze, or would I be able to save lives? What about my training? Would I remember how to treat the various types of injuries?" A little self-doubt, as I didn't know what to expect of myself. I was untested and still pretty green. Most of the other guys were silent as well, riding along with heads bowed as if in prayer. It was a pregnant pause for what they knew would lie ahead.

The trucks took us back through Hai Van Pass, the area we had just come from, down from the cooler mountains and into the hot rice paddies, in and out of Da Nang, and through several small villages of grass huts. There were the water buffalo and the ever-present little children begging for "chop chop." Finally, we turned off HWY 1 and headed down what in the U.S. would be little more than a dirt path. Here it was called a road. We were going into an area known as Go Noi Island, an area of land in between two rivers in the An Hoa Basin. This was an area used by the NVA to regroup and resupply. Finally, after what seemed like ages, the truck convoy came to a stop at a Marine combat base and the skeleton of a burned bridge. Oddly enough, the bridge was called "Liberty Bridge" (never found out why). It was a huge structure built by Navy Seabees out of the biggest lumber beams I had ever seen. The plan was to take this bridge over to Go Noi Island. The enemy had other plans for the bridge, however, and they had been successful. As I found out later, this would be a type of game that was played my whole year in 'Nam. The military would build the bridge, and the North Vietnamese Army would blow it up or burn it. This happened over and over, which kept the Marines, the combat base, and the NVA busy. Some men spent almost their whole year in Vietnam building and rebuilding Liberty Bridge.

To get to the enemy, we still had to get across the river. The Captain of Lucky Lima (whose name will not be mentioned) was from the "Old Corp" and to us, a very old man. He was a career Marine who had come up through the ranks until he got stuck at Captain. The guys had stories that they told about him and some of his crazy ideas. He thought the Marines in his charge should tape flashlights to their helmets to aid in seeing at night. Thankfully, this idea was nixed by the Colonel. No use giving the enemy an illuminated target. He also wanted to use Bangalore torpedoes to blast our way through hedge rows of bamboo. Not a bad an idea, but the torpedoes were not being manufactured at the time.

The Captain's solution of getting across the river was to enlist a good Marine to swim over to the other side with a long rope and tie it off. Not necessarily a bad idea except for the guy that had to swim. I am sure he was cussing all the way. Fortunately, he made it without any incident and tied off the rope. The rest of us formed a line and swam or walked across the river. The sun was high in the sky and the water felt good. The enemy was not in the area or we would have all been like sitting ducks just waiting to be shot. We were behind on our schedule and needed to catch up with the rest of the regiment. We changed gears from a cool swim to a quick hot hump (walk/march). As the day drew down, we needed to find a good place to set up camp for the night. We knew that the area had been sprayed with Agent Orange, but at the time we didn't understand the consequences. We set in and I pulled out my C-Rations. That night I was dining on ham and beans. I had just lit my heat tab to start a fire to warm my "ham and mothers" as we called it. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw what looked like a red stream of water dropping from the sky to the ground and it was followed by a "brrrrrrt" sound. Warren, the radio man for the 2nd platoon, told me it was "Spooky" or "Puff the Magic Dragon" (A Douglas fixed-wing aircraft) but in fact it was one of our C130 gunships that was firing.

Early the next day we set about trying to find the NVA (North Vietnamese Army). We had expected to have engaged them by now but they were notorious for not staying in one place for any length of time. Except for a couple of snipers, they kept moving and we kept chasing. Every now and then they would fire off a shot or two just to let us know they were around, but gratefully, they were terrible shots. I still find it amazing how a single shot or two can bring a Marine company to a rapid halt. This was also the day that I would understand the term "short round." A short round is an artillery or mortar round that, for whatever reason, lands short of its intended target. As we stopped and were waiting for the 60mm mortars to fire ahead of us, we had several short rounds. One of the rounds landed short in the area where the other 2nd platoon Corpsman was. He never knew what hit him. One minute he was there, and the next minute, he was gone. I felt badly for him and his family. His family would have nothing but memories. I also felt badly for the guys who had fired the mortars, although they were not at fault. As it turned out, we thought some of the mortar rounds had gotten wet in crossing the river and caused them to misfire.

I was now the only Corpsman for the whole platoon. This deadly pastime of hide and seek that we were playing seemed to go on for days with nothing accomplished on our end. It was difficult knowing that we had killed one of our own but couldn't get to the enemy. We would find where they had been, but not where they were. Time dragged as we walked along. The enemy snipers took pot shots at us. We flipped the finger to the snipers and got under cover until the snipers left.

Finally, Mike Company had trapped some NVA in a village and requested we flank the village to seal the trap. We were all excited that we finally were going to "get some." Mike Company was going to sweep into the village and we were to set up an ambush on the other side to corner the NVA as they came out. Our platoon was sent down a trail to take up position for the impending ambush. We had walked down the trail a little way, when suddenly, the ambusher became the ambushed. We found ourselves trapped in an L-shaped ambush. The air was full of dozens of bullets that sounded like bees flying by. This being my first firefight made me sort of like a deer in the headlights, just standing there while the bullets flew by me. My good friend Fo Fo, a Marine from American Samoa, came running up and pushed me to the ground, shouting, "Get down, Doc." As I fell to the ground, I felt a hot sting on my back. I had been hit, or so I thought. I crawled over to Fo Fo, and asked him to check me out. "You're okay Doc, just grazed you." I would have a burn on my back for about six months.

To this day I don't know if Fo Fo pushed me into the round, or away from it. I decided to believe the latter. As I lay there and the Marines returned fire, the air was full of hundreds of rounds going out and coming in. "Beezzz, Beezzz," each bullet made a sound as it flew by. Suddenly the cry for help, "Corpsman Up" came from several areas. Some of the bullets had found their mark, and I had wounded. I crawled over to the nearest injured Marine, who had been shot in the stomach. It was a strange sight as we were close enough that the bullet cauterized the wound and he had no bleeding. In my head, I immediately began to review the procedure for treating someone with a gut shot.

As I worked, more cries for help came. "Corpsman Up" rang out all over. At this point I was really upset, I didn't know what I was going to do, as I was the only corpsman in the platoon and had several injured. Suddenly, Doc Joy, from another platoon appeared, and asked me if I needed help. Doc Joy showed up several other times when I couldn't get to everyone. As things calmed down, I realized that my jungle utilities were soaked through, wet from top to bottom from my perspiration. I found this to be true in later firefights also. No wonder that I lost so much weight. I also became experienced in making myself as small as possible. One of the guys once told me that for a tall guy that I did a remarkable job of folding myself together.

In the 2nd platoon, we took two wounded, two KIA, and two heat casualties. We were unsure of the number that the enemy sustained because they carried the men away, leaving bloody trails. They, like us, did not leave anyone behind, so when we actually saw or found dead or wounded we knew we had really blasted them and had done great damage. Although we were often in contact with the NVA and less frequently the Viet Cong (local yokels), we seldom, if ever, saw them. They were well-camouflaged, as they would fire from bunkers.

As we made our way to the village, I expected to see to corpses as payment for my fallen buddies. We found nothing. The NVA was a worthy opponent and was seldom taken by surprise. The smell of death lingered in the village and we took dark solace that the deaths of our friends had been avenged. Operation Allen Brook lasted for several months and our platoon was engaged in several firefights. The U.S. suffered the loss of 175 KIA but the NVA and VC lost 1,917, not counting the wounded.

May 28, 1968

Dear Mom:
The reason I have not been writing is because I'm on an operation. Operation Allen Brook by name, it's just southwest of Da Nang. I haven't had time to write at all, Charlie has been giving me a lot of patients, so has Sol (the sun) for that matter. We have gotten mail twice since the operation started; I guess that is pretty good. There is a rumor going around the operation may be ending soon. I hope so, there isn't much left of our company. We have had six killed in action, and ten to fifteen wounded, plus many heat related casualties. But I'm fine! We aren't fighting the Viet Cong, but the NVA and they are good. God must be with me because they have ambushed us twice. The bullets were flying all around my ears; both times I made it out.

On hindsight, it wasn't the best thing to write your mom and tell her bullets were flying all round your ears. In my defense, I had never been in a war. I wasn't aware of the proper etiquette for writing letters home. During Operation Allen Brook, the temperature averaged 110 degrees. With the stress of fighting, heat, and humidity, sometimes I evacuated as many or more men for heat-related issues. I was bothered by the heat, but realized that to stay hydrated that I needed to drink water.

Once, as we were walking along a riverbank, we thought of jumping into the river to cool off. About that time, we started to take sniper fire from across the river. As you become seasoned in combat, you can tell how close the rounds are by the sound they make. These rounds were way off the mark. We ignored the shots until someone got the idea to stop, drop their pants, and moon the sniper. This seemed like a good idea at the time, and several Marines followed. This must have made the sniper angry because his shots began to get closer and closer. So up came the pants, and down the trail we went until out of range. No harm, no foul.

Operation Allen Brook wasn't my last taste of action. Operation Mameluke Thrust was my second operation. It was in an area called oddly enough "Happy Valley." The enemy took over 2000 KIA, and we had around 175 KIA. My next operation, Operation Meade River, was, comparatively speaking, more of a stroll around Vietnam as Lima Company did not see as much action. My last official operation was Operation Houston. I sort of thought the name was cool, as Houston is my middle name. Fortunately, we again did not see a great deal of action on this mission. Our primary responsibility was to guard an area called Hai Van Pass and aid in keeping HWY 1 open and fairly safe to travel. We gave our own names to the areas where we fought battles: "Arizona Territory," "Happy Valley," "Goi Noi Island," "Dodge City," and "Charlie Ridge."

By far, the one that was the largest and where we spent the most time in was "Arizona Territory." In An Hoa Basin, "Arizona Territory" had the worst reputation among the troops. We all hated going into this area on patrol or on an operation. Much of it took on a netherworld feeling. The land was filled with craters, rice paddies, elephant grass (grass higher than your head and as sharp as your razor), and booby traps. Hedgerows also surrounded the myriad of villages in the territory. These villages were only populated with women and children. Any adult males in the village were "Dinky Dao," or at least that's what they told us. Dinky Dao meant that they were not playing with a full deck. We were often sent to villages to search for weapons or rice that had been hidden away by the NVA.

VIII

MOM DID WHAT?

Late one afternoon, my platoon got a radio message from the Captain to have me report to him. We had recently received a new Captain to run Lima. I thought the new Captain was outstanding. However, I am not sure what he thought of me. When I reached the command post, the Captain said, "Doc, Regiment is flying a Huey out to pick you up and take you back to Phu Bai." My first thought was that someone in the family had passed away and the Red Cross was having me go back home. I asked him if he knew why they wanted me and he said he didn't. So, I grabbed my gear and waited for the chopper. I hopped on the Huey. I was flown back to Phu Bai to our Regimental Base Camp. It was incredible that I was the only passenger and the pilot's only mission was to take me to Phu Bai.

Upon landing, I was given instructions to report to the Colonel's tent headquarters. When the Colonel finally called me into his office, I knew what to say: "Doc Fowler reporting as ordered, SIR!" The Colonel gave me a long, hard stare, but he did tell me to sit down. As I sat in front of this busy, busy man, I had not a clue as to why they flew a multi-million-dollar chopper out to get me. I was thinking, boy, this must be beyond bad! "Doc," the Colonel said, "Have you been writing to your mom and complaining that you are not getting all your mail?" What? This was a question that I was not expecting and really was not prepared to answer. Right out of the blue, out of left field, this question was dropped in my lap. I looked in the Colonel's eyes and without hesitation knew the correct answer was, "NO SIR!"

The Colonel, then went on to explain in painful detail what had happened. "Apparently, YOUR Mother has contacted Senator Vance Hartke." Senator Hartke was currently an Indiana Senator, and a very distant cousin to my mom. "YOUR mother told him that you are not getting your mail. Senator Hartke contacted the Pentagon, the Pentagon contacted the Commandant of the Marine Corps, the Marine Commander contacted the General of WESPAC (the general who had charge over us), and the General contacted ME."

The Colonel ordered me to write my mom a letter letting her know I was all right and was receiving my mail just fine. I really wasn't receiving my mail just fine, but discretion became the better part of valor and so I wrote what I was told. I was happy to comply. While I was writing the letter, an orderly brought in all my accumulated mail. Regrettably, my mom hadn't grasped that rural mail delivery was not always an option. They would chopper in our mail when a break in the action allowed. Mail was important but it was down the list after ammo and water. I had to marvel at the power of my mother.

The next day, they flew me back out to my company. When I reported in to the Captain, he asked me the question that I knew would come. "What was that all about, Doc?" The question was repeated by other guys in my platoon. What was I going to say? My mommy had gotten me in hot water over the mail? I had to tell truth, which always brought hearty laughter. As I remember, my first night back there were tons of stars in the black velvet sky. I lay there thinking that somehow I had survived the Brass. The sound of a radio message broke into my thoughts. "Tell Doc to write his mom that he got his mail." This message was sent to me only half in jest as the Colonel was obviously tying up loose ends.

IX

WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

June 8th 1968

Dear Mom:
Those prayers everyone is saying must be working.

After they took us off Operation Allen Brook, they put us on temporary duty with the 7th Marines on Hill 41, a Marine base camp near Da Nang. We were suppose to get some rest and wait for replacements to catch up to us. While there we would pull what were supposedly to be routine patrols. They sent the 2nd platoon out on a night time patrol even though we were only the size of a squad. We were expecting to not have problems, and to have little or no contact with the enemy.

We were fortunate to have one of our best men walking point that night. As our point man was walking into a village, he spotted a group of NVA that were setting up for the night. He opened fire with his M16. His actions that night kept us from walking into an ambush. Once the NVA were aware of us, they returned fire. We fell back and set up a 360 degree perimeter in a dry rice paddy. The dikes made excellent cover. The NVA didn't know exactly where we were so they began to probe our positions with Chicom grenades. We just kept our heads down and radioed for the reaction team to come and get us, only occasionally popping up to get off a shot or two. While we were in this position, the Marine next to me was shot in the arm. The bullets fired also struck his M16 and ruined his gun. I gave him my 45 while I worked on him. All of a sudden, he sat upright and fired about six rounds from my 45 over the dike. "That's one less," he said, as he scanned the horizon. We were more than ready for Reaction Squad to arrive. They had geared up and boarded two Amtraks to come and get us. The problem was that they did not know where we were. They were not as familiar with the area because we had strayed off our planned route. The only solution we could come up with was to call for mortars to fire white phosphorus rounds into our position. The reaction squad would see this and head for us. Because we could blow ourselves up if the precise coordinates were not called in, this was really tricky. Our platoon Sergeant, Ollie Forte, proceeded to call in the coordinates and yelled "Shot out!" We all got as close to the ground as we could and waited. It seemed like time was frozen until we heard the whoosh and the explosion. We saw a burst of white that hit the middle of the rice paddy which was perfectly placed. The reaction squad radioed that they saw our position and they headed for us. They arrived a few minutes later with all guns firing. They were a welcome sight. I recognized the first guy out of the Amtrak as the machine gunner that I had shared a hole with during my first nights with the company. I was glad to see that we both were still alive. There had not been a lot of return fire from Charlie and I thought, "I'm safe now." We had taken a few wounded but nothing serious. Then someone yelled, "Rocket!" The Amtrak was hit on the left side with an RPG (a rocket propelled grenade) next to where I stood. To this day, I believe that a guardian angel protected me from the blast. I could see red/orange pieces of hot metal (shrapnel) flying by me. I felt my unit one medical bag being pulled from my shoulder and stood in shock for a few seconds before realizing that I was okay. Others were not in the same situation. I treated both minor and serious wounds. As soon as it was possible, we took off for safer ground. Nobody in my unit slept well that night even though we were exhausted. I was drained.

Due to casualties, they tried to give us some down time with no major actions. They put us on road duty again, guarding a bridge near Da Nang. As a result, I had several days of much-needed time to regroup. Bridge duty was great; I got in a lot of rack time. They also sent another corpsman for the platoon.

I had also been in-country long enough to start dreaming about R&R, which was short for "rest and relaxation." The troops had several choices: Hawaii, Thailand, Australia, Philippines, or just staying in-country. I thought Hawaii would be the best bet. I could meet Debby and my mom. I hoped to convince Debby to marry me in Hawaii.

June 12th 1968

Dear Humans:
My ear is fine now.

Living in the bush for so long, I began my letters home by addressing my family as humans. I had been living more like an animal and I certainly didn't feel human. As a grunt that walked almost everywhere, I was somewhat jealous of those who rode vehicles to their designation and wished that I could be so lucky. I had my wish fulfilled when our squad took two tanks out on squad patrol. I was riding on the side of the lead tank with my back resting against the turret when the world went "Bang" and I was thrown rather abruptly across the tank. I had been enjoying my ride until the tank ran over a land mine. I was pelted with dirt and shrapnel. Immediately, starting with the part that I considered most vital, I began grabbing my body to check to see if everything was still intact. Miraculously, I was not hurt except for my ear. I had suffered a concussive injury. I had blood trickling out of both ears. My left ear was worse and for a while my head rang like a muffled bell. The tank crew yelled at me to see if I was okay. I could hear them but everything was muffled. The blast had blown the track off the left side of the tank and we could barely move. The tank driver was able to back the tank up, and in doing so, ran over yet another mine. At this point I decided that being a ground pounder and getting off the tank might be the best course of action. The doctor who looked at my ears later, said that it looked like my ears had hemorrhaged, but that they looked like they were healing. That's Navy talk: We need you in the bush and so you are okay.

June 29th 1986

Dear Humans:
No, we don't have any vitamin pills issued to us.

Mom was always asking questions about my health and hygiene. On a regular basis, I had to answers questions of whether I was taking vitamins, getting hot meals, and showering, etc. I was careful how I responded to her; I did not want to visit the Colonel again.

July 3rd 1968

Dear Humans:
You remember that I wrote that I got a new Corpsman, one I was stationed with at St. Albans. Well, I was talking to him today, and found out he is the brother of the St. Louis Cardinals' quarterback.

The fact that my friend and fellow corpsman was from a family that I considered famous would always serve to remind me of the cross section of young men who served in Vietnam, many of whom actually volunteered for Vietnam. All of the men handled the stress in different ways. My faith was important to me in getting through the mess.

June 25th 1968

Dear Humans:
Yes, I get enough to eat (mostly c-rations). But if you run around in this heat and humidity you are bound to lose weight.

I had made the mistake of sending a picture home that apparently showed off my skinny body. Mom picked right up on that and she concluded that I was wasting away. In Vietnam, you had to deal with the 100+ temperatures and 90% humidity. We wore our jungle utilities with the pant legs rolled up and no shirt whenever possible. I would wear an undershirt under my flak jacket. At night, I would put on a shirt and roll the pant legs back down to protect myself from the ever present mosquitoes. Drinking fluids was a necessity; I had salt tabs that we used to make us drink. I had to make sure everyone took their salt tabs, malaria pills, and used their halazone pills every day. I was a walking pharmacy.

X

HILL 310

August 16th 1968

Dear Humans:
These past two weeks we were on an operation SW of Da Nang, in the mountains with the 7th Marines. We have been fighting the NVA for hills 310 and 270 (the hills so named for the elevation above sea level). We captured all kinds of weapons including two anti-aircraft guns.

Both hills were on the flight path that our jets took to land back in Da Nang. The operation was brought about by the fact that the NVA were using the anti-aircraft guns too effectively and had shot down an F4. Thankfully, the crew had bailed successfully over Da Nang Harbor and were rescued. It was a costly operation for both sides. We had 8 KIA and 34 WIA from our assaults up the hills, which included two corpsmen from Lima Company. We had joined several other Marine companies on this operation after marching about 8 miles during the night. Now, if we had been Army, we would have most likely been choppered in. But we were hardcore Marines, we humped all the way and then entered the battle. Climbing up these hills was no fun. Not only were we putting up with the physical exertion, but mortars were dropping on us as well. The top of hill 310 was honeycombed with tunnels and trenches. Mike Company, one of our sister companies, was given the dubious honor of attacking up the hill first. They took several casualties that were caused mainly from automatic weapon fire and grenades. When they were ordered to pull back, it was Lima's turn. Lima Company tried to assault up the hill, but we didn't have much luck either. We also took several casualties. One Marine was wounded by the NVA and left alive on the hill. The NVA would often leave someone wounded and tried to pick off anyone that tried to help their wounded brother.

This was one of the worst days for me while I was in-country. Doc Joy, who had helped me during my first fire fight, tried to make it to the wounded Marine. He was ripped apart by machine gunfire. He had to have known that his chances of making it were not good, but that did not stop him from trying. That was just the type of man he was. He was willing to give his life to try to save another. Another corpsman tried, but had similar results as he was gravely wounded. After that, the Captain gave the order to pull back so he could call in more air strikes. I cried that day as we carried our dead and wounded to the med-evac area. It was the only time I cried while I was in Vietnam.

The next day our platoon was ordered to try and take the hill. I was incredibly nervous as we began our assault up the hill. I was expecting the same type of reception that had played out previously. To my happy amazement, we made it all the way to the top of the hill without a single shot being fired at us. The NVA had decided to leave during the night. Nothing was left except the dead that had been entombed in the tunnels and bunkers. The stench of death hung in the putrid air over that awful hill.

Having become King of the Hill, what did we do? After looking for weapons or intelligence that might be of value, we were directed to abandon the hill. It was a maneuver that I never understood. We were told to complete our mission and leave. The NVA would reoccupy the area and we would have to fight again to take the same hill for umpteen times. Later in the war, this tactic would begin to change. Finally, the U.S. would occupy and secure an area to prevent enemy soldiers from moving back in.

August 21st 1968

Dear Humans:
I could use another package of goodies with some more pudding and a chocolate drink mix called "Swiss Miss."

I do not entirely understand what happened with this simple request. It could have been the fault of bad handwriting on my part. Faithfully, my Mom went around to all the major stores in the Evansville area asking if they had a SWIFT MISS that she could send to her son in Vietnam. Surprisingly, none of the markets carried swift misses. I would have loved to have seen the expressions on the faces of the clerks.

In August, I was looking forward to rotating back to the Battalion Station. Rules were that corpsman would stay in the bush for six months before rotating back to a rear area. I was really ready to be "in the rear with the gear" as the saying went in 'Nam. I had experienced enough close calls. The life expectancy of a corpsman was really nothing to write home about. It could be less than a minute in a fire fight. The enemy would shoot any solider, but they would target officers, radiomen, and corpsmen. The NVA knew that corpsmen were in short supply in the field. There had been many times that I had been the only corpsman in the platoon for an extended period of time before another man was sent out.

September 1st 1968

Dear Humans:
Only about half the company got to go to China Beach.

China Beach was beautiful. Wonderful, white sand beaches slid out to meet the blue ocean. The warm water was just right for playing and swimming. Military used the area for in-country R&R. The USO had a facility that provided entertainment for war-weary soldiers. Our company had been selected to go because our platoon had taken the brunt of several attacks. It was not feasible for all of us to go at once, so we were sent in different groups.

September 8th 1968

Dear Humans:
I got a letter from Chief Kupper at Camp Lejeune yesterday (He was in charge of my old unit). All the old gang is doing fine, all except for Harvey Gray, he was killed in action. I was glad I got to spend that extra time with Harvey on my way to Vietnam. I am mostly numb to this sort of thing by now but this one hurts. Harvey was a good man and a friend. That stuff I wanted you to get was SWISS Miss not SWIFT MISS.

XI

BATTALION AID STATION

September 10th 1968

Dear Humans:
Guess what, they finally took me out of the bush yesterday. Everything is a little confusing now, you know how things get. We have to stand watch, but I don't mind that. I got a package from one of the guy's parents. He had been shot in the arm and chest, and I patched him up and put him on a med-evac chopper. He is back in the states now at the Great Lakes Hospital.

The BAS in the rear was a mini hospital staffed with doctors and corpsmen. We would hold sick call on a regular basis and treat the seriously wounded before putting them on the med-evac chopper. This is where I had my ears checked, for example. Life for the corpsman was easier back at the BAS. It was still dangerous but better than being out in the bush, and besides, monsoon season was approaching. The BAS and Regimental Headquarters were at an old French area that had been a power plant called An Hoa. We moved there from Phu Bai, sometime in June. Most of the action around An Hoa consisted of small firefights, ambushes, and sniping. However, during my last couple of months there, the enemy stepped up attacks on the base, with rocket and mortar and ground assaults, but with limited success. As a corpsman assigned to the BAS, my duties included going out on patrols, standing watch on the line at night, and helping with sick call.

Near An Hoa, there was another small hospital that was run by volunteers from Switzerland. They treated anyone that was hurt which included the Vietnamese. I took supplies to them a couple of times before they were ambushed. All of the staff were either killed or wounded. After that incident, the Swiss decided to shut down the hospital.

My time at the BAS went fairly quickly. Usually, my day would start with sick call. In the evening we would have dinner, play cards, and drink a few beers. Some of us would stand watch. Charlie would like to fire mortar rounds, or rockets during the evening, and I spent many of my evenings in a bunker in front of sick bay. Usually no damage would be done, but every now and then, incoming would find a human target. I had a little more free time while at the BAS. One of my favorite things to do was to go to the local village for an iced coffee. And it was there at the local eatery that I had an opportunity to experience fish head soup. This soup was bony but much more flavorful than C-rations. In the village, I frequented the local barber shop for haircuts. While getting my hair cut, I kept my 45 locked and loaded on my lap. This was the way Marines reminded the local barber that they shouldn't try any funny business. I think this ploy was more macho than anything.

Mail call was still very important. And thanks to being back in the rear, mail call came on a regular basis. Back at BAS a care package arrived for me. I didn't recognize the return address. In the letter, the mom thanked me for saving her son's life. She also told me that her son's father had been a Corpsman in WWII. He was one of the men that raised the American flag on Iwo Jima, which was a seminal moment. I was flabbergasted after reading the letter. My Marine, who was a radioman, had been wounded during a nasty fire fight. Our platoon sergeant (a great guy) had been killed with the same machine gun burst that had hit the radioman. The radioman was in bad shape, with a sucking chest wound, and another wound to his arm. I made a house call and patched him up. I remember being surprised at his strength. During this battle, fighting had been intense. We sustained several casualties of WIA and KIA. Our opponents were dug in their bamboo bunkers. They also had automatic weapons, mortars, and a tank that we heard but did not see. We were hit with automatic weapons, tear gas, and mortar rounds. "Corpsman Up" was a frequent cry. I had finished tending to the radio man when I got another holler for help. Since the fighting was intense, I was not thrilled to have to run over 200 yards as I tried to keep my head down. When I arrived, I found Rudy, a friend that I had made since joining Lima. He was a machine gunner and I assumed that he had been hit when I saw his red-stained pant leg. I couldn't find an entrance or an exit wound. So I cut his pant leg open with my K bar knife to get a better look. There was no sign of injury except a big red splotch on him. I was puzzled about what could be causing the painful burning sensation that Rudy described. After asking him if he recalled being hit with anything, he said, "No,"but he wondered if it could be from the tear gas. Out of desperation, I told Rudy to empty his pockets. In 'Nam, our pants had two huge thigh pockets, one on each leg. In my pockets, I carried a big bag of salt tablets, and other medical supplies. Rudy had used his pockets to store hot peppers that he picked in a field. His perspiration from the fire fight had made his uniform completely wet, and had caused the peppers to leach. I have to admit that I was totally infuriated about exposing myself to enemy fire only to find it was a hot pepper injury. Later, after remembering my own experience with peppers in the states, I forgave the guy. The score was Peppers—2 and Marines—0. This became the most bizarre house call that I made, topping out the time when a Marine got hit by a dirt clod.

When I rotated back to the BAS, my food life improved immensely. We could eat in the mess hall. We also made a grill to cook food when we were able to wrangle some steak or hamburger from the cooks. While I was at the BAS, an Army Ranger unit moved in next to us. We found out that they had a tent full of all sorts of edible goodies. A few of the more adventurous chaps decided to liberate some of that good food from the Army. After applying face-black, we snuck through the lines, and helped ourselves. The Army CO contacted our poor Colonel to get to the bottom of the problem. Wearing a slight smile on his face, the Colonel told us to stop. I think he enjoyed the fact that we pulled one over on the Army. It was a treat to eat the tuna in the mushroom soup, courtesy of the Army.

October 17th 1968

Dear Humans:
Guess what, it's still raining and raining and raining.

The monsoon season was in full swing. I was glad to be back in the rear and not tromping about in the bush. Life was fairly routine at the BAS. New Year's Eve was an exception. I had watch duty that night and was sitting on top one of the bunkers behind the BAS. It was a very dark night. Suddenly, I heard a pop, and saw a flare go up into the sky. "Pop, Pop, Pop," flares were being shot up all over the sky. Blue, green, yellow, and red colors streaked through the sky, looking festive. I was experiencing a New Year's Eve celebration--Marine style. It was awesome. As it turned out, the fireworks had cost several thousands of dollars. On this occasion the Colonel was not happy. He was not smiling when he addressed the fireworks in the sky.

February 27th 1969

Dear Humans,

Well, you probably heard on the news about the Tet Offensive. I don't know if anything was said about An Hoa or not, but we have been hit every day for the last five days. The first night they blew up one of our ammo dumps for one of the artillery units and just about broke through our lines, but they didn't make it. We've had about 60 casualties in the last five days. They also tore up the airstrip pretty good, and so planes cannot land for right now. So far, they've only hit us at night, except for throwing several rockets at us. One hit just a few feet from our bunker, leaving a big crater in the ground, throwing dirt clods at us about the size of bowling balls.

When the enemy blew the ammo dump, we were all out by our bunkers as the attack progressed. When the sky lit up, and before the sound reached us, we could see a shock wave of air coming towards us. The enemy had manged to do some damage to our area. We had to be resupplied by convoy (truck) from Da Nang since the planes could not land. This meant slower mail time. Everything was taking much longer since the planes could not land. This was a dangerous trip for the truckers, not having a real road to travel, only a glorified path filled with snipers, and booby traps. I had a great deal of respect for the guys who kept our supplies coming.

March 1st 1969

Dear Humans:
We are still getting hit every night. One night we had about 80 rounds or mortars and rockets coming at us.

With Tet 1969, An Hoa received more incoming than any other Marine base in I Corps. Spending a great time in the bunker and having our sleep cut short was inconvenient, but that was about the worst of it. At the time, thankfully, the mortars were limited in their effectiveness. The enemy would leave after firing a round or two, because our radar would track their location, and return fire.

March 10th 1969

Dear Humans:
I should be getting my flight date any day now.

I was what was called a "Short Timer," which meant that my time in 'Nam was almost over. I was excited that I was going back to the real world. I was anxious and hoping that I would not get hurt in the last few days. I did not want to stand watch, or go out on patrol. I was very glad when a new Corpsman showed up. The new Corpsman said he had just met a Corpsman who was from Evansville. It turned out to be Jim Kuebler. Jim was one of my best friends and lived in my neighborhood. Ironically, I was thinking about getting out of 'Nam, and Jim ended up being assigned to 3/ 5 Mike Company at An Hoa.

BAS

XII

FREEDOM BIRD

29 March 1969

Dear Mom:
I'm writing from the USO in Da Nang. I was on my way home!

I left Vietnam the same way I arrived. I boarded a commercial airliner to Okinawa. A big cheer and applause erupted from us as we lifted off the ground in our freedom plane. We had made it! We had beaten the odds and we were on our way back to the U.S. I was looking forward to seeing my family and getting married.

It was the last big cheer that I heard for a while. There were no parades or signs saying, "Welcome Home." Some soldiers were jeered and treated as stupid for going to Viet Nam. It was not unheard of that men would change into civilian clothes at their first opportunity. They did not want be recognized as being in Vietnam. I left my uniform on because I was proud of my service. I had saved lives and I had survived. I also enjoyed the fact that many military personnel didn't recognize my insignia that I wore on my Marine uniform, and saluted me because they thought that I was an officer.

My dad met me at the airport; he shook my hand, and told me that he was proud of me. The World War II hero told me that he didn't think that he could do what I had done. I considered this the biggest compliment that my father ever gave me.

It took time to connect back into the good life that many Americans took for granted. I realized that not everyone was experiencing the equality and resources of our country, but the animosity towards veterans was unfathomable. As soldiers, we thought we were fighting for the folks back home. As it turned out, it seemed like that we were only fighting for the guy in the hole next to us. Many of those brave men and women came home in boxes or were left missing in action. Others come home damaged and suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Many returning Vets turned to alcohol, drugs, or committed suicide.

I have asked myself how Vietnam changed me and how I escaped destructive behavior. Having been in Vietnam, I know for a fact that I appreciate life more than many civilians. At this point, many books would say "THE END." But to those of us who fought in Vietnam and other wars, there is no end; the wounds continue to bleed at times. As Shakespeare wrote, *"From this day to the ending of the world, But we in it shall be remembered."*

Discharged

Military Service
March 1966-March 1970
Vietnam Service
March 1968-March 1969

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I med-evaced two seasoned Marines that were brought down by PTSD in Vietnam. They had finally reached their limits and couldn't manage the horrors of war any longer. I am convinced that my faith helped me get through the nasty stuff that I witnessed. I would pray almost daily and read my Bible for comfort. I fully believe that God, for whatever reason, protected me. He gave me peace to do my job and stay the course. I know that the Lord watched over and guided me my whole twelve months.

I would offer this for your consideration. If you do not have a personal relationship with Christ, I suggest that you begin that quest. There is a difference between "knowing about" God and "knowing" God. My Christian walk has not been a straight path but there is perseverance in knowing that Christ loved me and died for my sins. God offers His Son to all, but you need to accept His free gift. You cannot assume that because you grew up hearing about God that you automatically have been drafted into His family. Eternal life is free, but you need to enlist.

A TRIBUTE TO BOB FOWLER

I almost always addressed him as Bob Fowler. I am not quite sure why that started, but I know for sure that he was my one and only Bob Fowler. I always told him that I married him because he was taller than I was and that my last name changed from beginning with a "Z" to an "F." Growing up, I was always the last in the lunch line, or last to give a school report. Alphabetically, "F" is a safe place to be. Of course, the real reason that he stole my heart is that he did his best to make me feel loved. Early on in our marriage, someone commented that he treated me like a princess. Without a doubt, he did. In that protective mantle that he assumed, he often did not share problems with me unless he absolutely had to do it. Healthy or not, he was able to compartmentalize his emotions, and not express the negative ones. On the other hand, there were times that he would be plagued with nightmares. There were a few incidents when I was being pushed out of bed, or being scooped up to be carried to a bunker. He was not a fan of rain, or thunderstorms. The thunder would often startle him if there were sudden claps.

He was the Dad that was never too tired to play games with his kids. He would even play with paper dolls when cajoled by his daughter. I have sweet memories of him picking the kids up into his arms, and "flying" them into their beds at night. He was a perpetual optimist, and typically unflappable. He loved being with people, and he rarely met someone he didn't like. You almost instantly became his new best friend. He did appreciate life! Probably, he will always be remembered by his "best friends" because he loved telling corny jokes, and sharing puns.

In the morning of the day that he lost consciousness before passing away, he was discussing with me a trip to the beach, finishing this book, and having donuts in celebration of just having completed his second hip surgery. He was always looking forward with a zestful attitude. For several years, Bob battled several types of cancer, and in latter years, underwent dialysis. While tethered to a machine, he began in earnest to write his Vietnam story. With all his medical issues, he never complained about the pain, or the loss of unfulfilled plans. He told me once to pretend that I was a refugee carrying all belongings on my back, and the task at hand would be easier. He always told me that no matter how badly things appeared on the surface, everything would be all right. I was quite shocked when his heart failed him, and he went to be with his Savior on February 7, 2018. I remember someone asking him during one of his hospital stays if he was afraid of dying. "Of course not," he said, "It will be all right to be in heaven."

This story is Bob’s story with a few tweaks from me. No doubt, some passages could be clearer. I think Bob's purpose was to share his experiences. He often told people that war is not like the movies. I think he also wanted to honor his fellow soldiers. My purpose is to honor Bob Fowler, and to leave a written legacy for his children, and grandchildren. He never allowed circumstances to break his spirit. I surely miss him saying, "It will be all right... Debby, it will be all right."

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Countless people gave encouragement, and suggestions on this book project. To all of you, I say thank you on behalf of Bob Fowler. ~ Debby Fowler

27 FEB 68

DEAR HUMANS:

WERE YOU PROBABLY HEARD ON THE NEWS ABOUT THE TET OFFENSIVE. I DON'T KNOW IF THEY SAID ANYTHING ABOUT ANOTHER OR NOT - BUT WE'VE BEEN HIT EVERYDAY FOR THE LAST FIVE DAYS.

THE FIRST NIGHT THEY BLEW UP ONE OF OUR AMMO DUMPS AND ALMOST BROKE THROUGH THE PERIMETER, BUT THEY DIDN'T MAKE IT.

WE'VE HAD ABOUT 60 CASUALTIES OVER THE LAST FIVE DAYS. THEY ALSO TORE UP THE AIRSTRIP PRETTY GOOD SO THE PLANES HAVEN'T BEEN ABLE TO LAND. THEY HAVE TO BRING US OUR SUPPLIES AND MAIL BY CONVOY (ABOUT EVERY OTHER DAY).

I'M ALRIGHT THOUGH WE HAVE A NICE BIG BUNKER TO GET PUS A COUPLE TANKS OUT IN FRONT OF US. SO FAR THEY'VE ONLY HIT US AT NIGHT - EXCEPT FOR A COUPLE ROCKET ATTACKS.

THE PICTURES GOT HERE IN GOOD SHAPE

I SHOULD BE GETTING MY FLIGHT DATE IN A WEEK OR SO.

ASIDE FROM THE PIPE HEY DID YOU LIKE THE DRAWING. PIPES DON'T SMELL THAT BAD I ONLY SMOKE AROMATIC BLENDS ANYWAY.

WERE ALL FATHERS NOW MISS GAVE BIRTH TO SIX PUPS (5 MALE AND 1 FEMALE). IF I GET MY FILM IN TIME I CAN GET SOME PICTURES.

HOW IS THE DIET COMING ALONG.

DON'T WORRY ABOUT ME TOO MUCH I'LL BE HOME SOON.

LOVE
BOB