
FIFTEEN**New Blood**

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I shook the last vestige of sleep away at the booming voice that seemed to be coming from everywhere. This was the first time I'd ever heard a wake-up call given over a PA system.

Everyone dressed quickly and moved out to the side of the building. I hadn't noticed it last night, but the ground between these barracks was covered with plates of corrugated steel that were connected together into one large sheet. They were the same as were used to build runways here. We new arrivals stood in formation on that surface. A podium had been placed at the front and the sergeant who'd given the wake-up call was waiting there. When we were all present he addressed us over the PA.

“Men,...some of you have been here for two or three days now and some of you arrived just last night. For you new people I'll explain the daily procedure we follow.

“First of all, this is a replacement center where most of you will spend three or four days waiting for your orders to be processed. Each morning, when you fall out to formation, we'll call the names of the men whose orders have come down. When you hear your name, you will gather up your belongings and be driven out to the airfield where you'll be flown to your new unit's headquarters.

“While you are here, you will perform whatever functions the duty sergeants assign you to.”

After reading a list of names of the men who would be leaving that day, he dismissed us for breakfast.

This was my first day in Vietnam and, with the rising of the sun, the scorching heat of the tropics was all to apparent. By nine o'clock I was completely soaked in sweat.

Cam Ranh appeared to consist primarily of pure white sand with clumps of beach grass spaced sporadically over its surface. That incredibly bright landscape reflected the heat back up from the ground so that it felt even hotter than the hundred-and-twelve degrees a thermometer would have indicated.

I wasn't assigned any particular duties on that first morning, which left me on my own until after lunch. At sometime around mid-morning, I felt overwhelmed by the heat. There was a shower building that stood by itself a short distance behind the barracks and no one seemed to be making use of it at the moment. I figured if I could just stand under a cold shower for awhile, I might at least feel a little fresher for part of the day.

The shower building was a simple affair. It was another half screened-in barracks type structure with a cement floor and a slightly raised island in the center. The island ran almost the length of the building and had ten shower heads on each side. Since there was no one else around, I had the entire building to myself. I stood for a long time turning slowly and relishing the refreshing stream of water that played over my body. When I felt like a human being again, I put on a fresh set of fatigues and headed back toward the barracks. To my amazement, and utter disappointment, I felt warm beads of sweat begin running down my face and back before I got ten steps from the shade of the shower building. And, by the time I reached the front door of the barracks, my fatigues were soaked in sweat again.

Stopping in the shade of the doorway, I turned and squinted out at the heavy, torrid air shimmering just above the hot, white sand.

“How the hell am I going to stand this for a whole year?”, I said softly to myself, feeling just as uncomfortable as I had before I took the shower. For the next month, until my blood thinned out, I’d learn just how oppressive the tropical heat could really be.

It turned out that I spent three full days and nights there at the replacement center. By the end of the third day I was really beginning to hope that my name would be called at the next morning’s formation. There was absolutely nothing to do and I was growing weary of hanging around. No friendships of any kind could be formed since everyone, including myself, was in transit and no one was around long enough to make the connection.