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## Absent of Grace and Mercy



**USS Gordon (courtesy: Naval Historical Center)**

On December 19<sup>th</sup>, 1967, four days after my twenty-third birthday, the USS Gen. W. H. Gordon slipped slowly and gently into Qui Nhon Bay, Republic of South Viet Nam. I was a medic with HHC (Headquarters and Headquarters Company) / 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion / 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Regiment (The Old Guard) / 11<sup>th</sup> Light Infantry Brigade.

In early March, 1968, after spending time on LZ Sue with Bravo Company, and stays at the aid stations on Hill 54 and LZ Bronco, I was assigned to 2<sup>nd</sup> Surgical Hospital in Chu Lai as Casualty Reporter / Hospital Liaison for our battalion and Task Force Barker. My primary duties were to assess, evaluate and interview our unit wounded when they arrived from the battlefield, and report to Battalion S-2.

I made daily visits to the wards, spending time talking with each man, bringing Red Cross supplied sundries or requested materials from

the PX, and when called to do so, tour with unit officers who came to visit with their wounded troops.

The most difficult function of my assignment were the visits to GR (Graves Registration) to identify, assess, evaluate, and confirm cause of death. Most of these men were known to me from the early days of our training at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii. Many were friends. All were brothers.

*An insufferable despair hung heavy along the murky waters of Acheron. Thick, black clouds tumbled and swirled with frenzied rage in a blood red sky.*

*Dark, unearthly shadows drifted uneasily above the charred and ashen landscape. It was an eternally damned place, chosen to serve as an un-holy tabernacle for mayhem and carnage; for fear and endless sorrow. No God or gods dare walk there; it was absent of grace and mercy.*

*The dog tired and sweat drenched platoon stumbled into the clearing. web-gear and tired asses hit the ground. Smokes were lit. Small talk and muffled laughter rolled uneasily in the sticky May night.*

*It was good to stop, to finally end their nomadic trek through jungle brush, and rice paddy muck in search of an elusive enemy. One by one each man settled in for the night.*

*All was not well.*

*As quick as a raging torrent and roaring thunder comes in an unexpected storm, the jungle erupted into a deadly and frantic fury. Hot, angry projectiles stampeded through the musty air, cutting a path of instant death. Shouts and screams filled the windless night. Then all was as swiftly still and silent.*

*The foul stench of death hung heavily around them, clinging to their clothes, filling their lungs. The deadly incense of cordite pierced the air in the retreating twilight.*

*A tattered paperback lay on the grassy rise; an outstretched hand gripped the curled and sweat stained pages. Bloodied fingers clawed in vain at the soft earth in a hopeless attempt to escape the coming tempest.*

*The weary, faltering rhythm of his fading heart summoned the demons to gather in ghoulish anticipation; waiting patiently for the moment when all is forever lost and the profane feast that would soon begin. The vital glow of his life grew pale and dim. One last image lay unseen in empty cold eyes, one final thought fell short of lasting memory. And in*

*the ominous silence between now and never, the desperate struggle for life and death began.*

*His life's blood ran warm through the hands of those who worked in vain to save him. They could not comprehend that he was already gone; the life they knew to be his had been torn from this world and flung carelessly into another.*

*Only the dead and dying heard the pitiless triumphant mockery as it moved in the ground beneath them...*

## **May 8, 1968**

My thoughts were wildly conflicted as I sprinted through the maze of screened wooden hooches of 2<sup>nd</sup> Surgical Hospital in Chu Lai. Delta Company had made contact and the wounded and dead were on the way. I waited uneasily at the pad for dust-off to arrive. My heart pounded in my ears and my lungs sucked in the heavy night air.

One of our medics was a casualty. Andy, Fred, and Leroy were medics with Delta Company. In the distant darkness the familiar cadence of blades slicing into the dank air worked its way into my anxieties. I watched with pained anguish as dust-off approached, touched down, and the wounded were off-loaded and rushed into the ER.

Gathering myself, I took a deep breath and followed them. The smell of blood and torn flesh filled the room. Doctors, nurses, and hospital medics went from litter to litter treating first those with the best chance of survival.

I slowly made my way to each litter, taking names and assessing wounds while searching for the medic. He was not among them. One of the wounded told me that "doc was hit" but could tell me nothing more.

I rejected the thought of where he could be and struggled with the persistent gnawing truth as I made my way out of the ER and trotted down the darkened road to Graves Registration (GR). I had done this so many times before and I knew he was there, but I would not say it; I would not dare think it.

The fridge room was dimly lit and cool. I had come to appreciate this room and the macabre opportunity it offered for escape from the hot and oppressive air outside its walls. On most occasions, the attendant would pull cool beers from an empty drawer while I examined the bodies of fallen comrades. With emotions shut down it had become nothing more than a daily routine: assess and evaluate the dead and

wounded, drink a beer and exchange smalltalk. Such is the stolid necessity that separates the living from the dead.

GR was nothing more than a grim crypt with a never-ending supply of dead. Time and countless visits had kindly dulled my senses. But that night, May 8<sup>th</sup>, the room would not willingly receive me. Struggling against my desire to turn and walk away, I made my way to the desk and asked about the recent delivery. The attendant led me to a drawer, pulled it open and unzipped the body bag.

It was Fred.

I stepped back as the hopelessness of his death struck me. The room went silent, and my head filled with an incredulous roar as the sinister, cold specter of death rushed past me once again; looked me in the eyes and moved on.

“GSW to the back of the head,” the attendant reported with a casual indifference as he turned and went about his business; his own senses numbed long ago.

A tight, knotted pressure began building in my chest and my head ached as I looked on the lifeless body of my friend. His face was unshaven and sweat streaked...and warm still to the touch. I gently lifted his head and located the entry wound. No exit. I wept silently for my friend; his life now gone. My tears fell on his body.

I was just two months into my duties as a Casualty Reporter and I had seen much death and mayhem already, and much more would follow before my tour was over, but this one was personal and filled with cruel irony.

In mid-January 1968, while pulling guard on LZ Sue, the word had come to us that another friend, Dave, had been killed. It was a friendly fire incident. As the platoon was moving through rice paddies, Dave reached up and grabbed the barrel of Fred’s M-16 to pull himself up. A shot rang out and a round entered Dave’s chest under his arm. In a matter of seconds he was dead.

Fred was devastated and noticeably changed when I saw him again sometime later. He was more subdued; quiet. The weight of that death hung heavy and hard on his spirit.

And now he was dead.

I turned and walked into the humid oppressive air. My body shook with anger and grief while the past, present and future collided in my head. I was physically and mentally exhausted from the goddamned daily bloody mayhem of torn and shattered bodies and watching men die. I had had enough.

I screamed at God that night as I made my way up the road. I could no longer contain my rage or my tears. I wanted the forces of Heaven to explain this to me.

The urgent cacophony of busy choppers was the only reply I heard that night as I made my way back to the ER under a star filled sky. God was silent...and Heaven was far from near.

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The aged USS Gordon cut smoothly through the blue-gray ocean, slowly rising and falling, sending a glittering salty mist over the bow in the early morning sun. We gathered to watch in fascination as a school of porpoise frolicked alongside; rising and plunging, leading the way.

Later that evening as the sun was setting; Fred, Jim, Andy, Lee, and I sat on the steel deck talking in low hushed tones discussing our impending fate. We were in a reflective and somber mood that December night as we steamed towards Viet Nam. Up to that time we had managed to avoid any discussion of our private thoughts and fears. We laughed and joked and ran about the ship as if on a cruise, or another training exercise. But it could be stilled no longer.

The disquieting reality of what lay ahead of us had finally surfaced and demanded that we acknowledge its presence. From that sullen moment forward we saw each day as if it were the last, and one another as if for the last time. That sense of powerless never left us. It was a simple fact; one year from that moment it was a certainty that one or more of us would be dead. It was an un-welcomed and forbidding thought.

Somewhere on deck, accompanied by several low voices, a guitarist strummed softly amidst the many muffled conversations around us. The whole ship seemed to have been gripped by the same haunting uneasiness that night.

The sun now long set, we sat silent, lost in our private thoughts. Fred quietly disturbed the silence with what now seems to have been a prescient thought. It has remained with me through all these years...

"If I die..." he softly announced, "I want to die for *a cause*, not just *be-cause*."

Just twenty-five days from his twenty-first birthday, Fred failed to get his wish.

*It was silent and still. The shadows grew restless; aroused with vile expectation and hungry for the souls delivered to them in this bitter place.*

*A shrill and demonic wailing echoed from the depths of the blackness. The time had come.*

*Death rose from the putrid depths and stood triumphantly above the tragedy before him. And with a cool indifference, he raised his staff to signal the gruesome feast to begin.*

## **December 5, 1967**

We watched in apprehensive silence as the glittering lights of Waikiki faded slowly into the inky black South Pacific night. It was December 5<sup>th</sup>, 1967, and our time in the Hawaiian paradise had come to its end. Months of training had shaped us, the 11<sup>th</sup> Light Infantry Brigade, into the *Jungle Warriors*. We were called to action by General Westmoreland who believed we were ready to battle the communist enemy on the other side of the globe.

Huddled aft on the USS Gordon, we strained to catch the last fading glimpses of the world we were leaving: warm sandy beaches, tanned and bikinied beauties, and most of all...our youth.

The shoreline shimmered softly like a strand of diamonds resting on the obsidian night as we sailed away to war. It flickered as if to say *aloha*...and then was gone.

The mood on ship was pensive and solemn as we stared into an empty and dark ocean. Quiet and reserved conversations could be heard as the gray merchant ship cut its way through the water. We knew that within this coming year many of us would be killed. Who amongst us would not return?

The answer was out there yet...somewhere beyond the horizon...waiting for us.

## **LZ Carentan (December 1967)**

The Huey shook as the turbine whined and reached for peak power. The giant rotor blades whistled and accelerated smoothly above us, cutting into the hot air, sending a swirling, reddish dust-cloud billowing in all directions. The chopper shivered slightly with anticipation, and then at the pilot's command, we rose gracefully and began our journey to LZ Sue. It was my first flight on a chopper and I was fascinated by the view through the open hatch as we climbed into the sky.

LZ Carentan slipped away below us and I watched with a detached indifference as it grew smaller and finally disappeared. Carentan had been a village once, now abandoned it was our first combat staging area where all elements of the 11<sup>th</sup> Light Infantry Brigade gathered before spreading out all over Quang Ngai Province. Carentan was where war and death introduced themselves to us. I had just turned 23 and we



**Rich Raitan at LZ Carentan (at right)**

had been in-country for two weeks with many more weeks ahead.

The convoy rolled into LZ Carentan in the mid-afternoon of December 20th, 1967, the day after we docked in Qui Nhon. Carentan was a sandy encampment, fidgety with the restless enthusiasm of thousands of soldiers settling into a warzone. Large numbers of local villagers under conical straw hats and wearing silk pajamas were everywhere. It was a queer sight, just as it was the day before in Qui Nhon, these people laboring within a military compound. There was much to learn.

Jim and I left our gear in our FLA (Front Line Ambulance) and headed for the aid station, which was nothing more than a big, army-green tent with most of our medical supplies stacked neatly to one side, waiting to be put in place. One by one the battalion medics arrived, and once we all were accounted for we discussed our next move.

It was decided that we should first erect the tent that would be our living quarters and let the organization of supplies wait until we were finished. Not having been tested by fire, we were having a good time laughing and joking while struggling with the construction of our new home. Our buoyant mood was more appropriate to a weekend camping trip than a combat encampment.

Deuce-and-a-halfes filled with troops, and jeeps with officers, continued to roll in throughout the day sending billowing clouds of dust

that covered our sweat-drenched bodies with a fine red powder. We were having one hell of a good time.

Once the tent was up and our cots were in place, we headed for the aid station and began the task of organizing our supplies and establishing an operational medical facility. We worked the rest of the evening and well into the night, and once everything was in place we retreated to our new home, talked for a while, and exhausted, drifted off to sleep.

The following two days, December 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup>, were spent filling sandbags and stacking them four feet high and two layers deep around the aid station and our quarters: blast walls to protect us from shrapnel and bullets. While we labored, Santa flew in on a Huey dressed in jungle fatigues, white beard and red cap, and handed candy-filled mesh Christmas stockings to each of us. It was surreal at best and left us all with thoughts of home and family.

Two medics had been picked to join one of the line companies on a local patrol early on the 22<sup>nd</sup> while the rest of us busied ourselves around the area and making rounds of the perimeter. All was relatively quiet those first days, except of course for the constant buzz of Hueys, the distant thunder of artillery, and muffled reports from a distant fire-fight. So far the war hadn't introduced itself. In the evening of December 22<sup>nd</sup>, sometime after dinner, a few of us wandered off to an isolated rise that put us slightly above our bivouac area and offered a clear view of the countryside.

It was easy to forget where we were. To our front, a large treeless hill rose in the near distance, and to the left, the rice paddies and open fields made a gentle incline towards a treeline, and beyond that, the mountains.

A joint appeared, was lit and passed around. A couple of Camel cigarettes were lit also and kept at the ready. We sat quietly, sucked in the harsh smoke and waited for the magical weed to entertain our brains.

A sudden muted burst to our left turned our heads in unison. Beyond the open fields, maybe three clicks away, a steady stream of tracers caught our eye. Two choppers were circling over a clearing and hurtling their hot death to the ground. Bright flashes of light followed seconds later by the booming report of explosive ordinance were turned into merriment by the cannabis frolicking in our heads. We were watching the war, in awe and completely indifferent to the mayhem taking place.

We heard someone approaching and quickly snuffed the weed and grabbed our Camels. PSGT Williams walked up, gazed back toward the clearing and turned again toward us. "You boys should get back to your units..." and with a knowing tone added..."Be careful." That was all he said, turned and left.

Later in that early star-filled morning of the 23rd, the beast came to pay us a visit. Charlie decided to test our mettle and hit the perimeter hard. The sudden and ferocious rattle of gunfire and ground-shaking explosions woke us abruptly from our sleep and thrust us into the reality of war. Someone, I think Bob, ran into the tent and called for medics. There were wounded on the perimeter and they needed FLAs...STAT!

I jumped up and grabbed my boots from under my cot, slipped them on and stuffed the laces inside. No time to lace and tie. The commotion in the dark tent sent us colliding into one another. I made it out and ran to my FLA, with Ralph right beside me headed for his FLA, and the two of us started our journey to the perimeter. The rest headed for the aid station.

Ralph and I made our way slowly to the perimeter where the fighting was in full fury, red night-driving lights softly illuminating the way. Stopped short of the wire by an anxious grunt, we grabbed our aid-bags and went the rest of the way on foot.

My heart was pounding hard in my chest and in my ears. Flares drifted crazily in the deep black sky, casting dizzying shadows on the ill-defined landscape beyond the wire. The crackling chatter of gunfire and violent roar of mortars and M-79 rounds grew louder as we made our way forward. Red and green tracers streaked back and forth from all directions like so many hurried fireflies. The tumbling buzz of hot, angry projectiles passed overhead and beside us. A sudden quick clank resounded behind us when a round hit an FLA.

Up to the wire and into the melee and confusion, we found our wounded. Ralph disappeared further down the perimeter and I picked up my patient. Another grunt assisted me getting him into the FLA, and once he was on board, I raced to the pad and waited for medevac.

He had gone out on a night training ambush led by Sgt. Maddox and they stumbled into a VC unit making its way toward our perimeter. A firefight erupted and Maddox went down. Godwin played dead as the VC moved over them and fired AK rounds into their prone bodies. Godwin was struck in the foot and continued to play dead while Charlie crawled over him.

Godwin's story was interrupted by the arrival of the Huey and I helped him onto the dust-off chopper and watched as it disappeared into the dark night. I made my way back to the perimeter and was told that all the casualties had been removed. The battle had subsided, but I was more than happy to head back to the aid station.

The assault had been a probe to test the unit's strength, and to identify weapon locations. It was an explosive event that had come and gone like a sudden summer thunderstorm. Perhaps the conflict we witnessed earlier had slowed this attack down.

I walked into the aid station, and in the dim light of lanterns, I saw several of our medics standing around a litter propped up on two saw-horses. A body lay on the litter. I was waved over and asked to join the group; our battalion doctor and company commander wanted us to see this dead man. His fatigue shirt had been opened exposing his chest and his pants had been removed. Edging closer, I saw that it was Maddox.

He had been shot several times and was covered in blood. One round left a gaping wound to his left cheek and tore away a piece of flesh, two rounds into his torso, and one into his thigh allowed the deep red of his blood to seep from his lifeless body. We were silent as we looked at this fallen man killed in combat. The realization of where we were had suddenly made its presence known to us.

Sgt Maddox had joined our brigade while we were still in Hawaii, three months before we shipped out. He had been in Viet Nam with the 1st Cav and was sent home on emergency leave. There had been a fire and two of his children had perished in the flames. His wife and one other child had survived. It is my understanding that he didn't have to ship out with us, but he insisted on returning to finish his tour.

And now he lay dead on a bloody litter, surrounded by army medics made to view his bullet-ridden body. Sgt Maddox was the battalion's first KIA, just four days after arriving in-country and one day after his twenty-fifth birthday.

It was unpleasant and unnerving to see this dead soldier. Our hearts still pounding and our senses yet raw, we stared at this man lying in a pool of his own blood. No amount of training prepared any of us for this moment. We stood there in stunned silence for what seemed like a very long time. This was not a movie or a field exercise, the man before us was dead and he was not coming back.