

Prologue

“DAD, GOT A call from Ms. Burk.” I sat holding the phone in a white-knuckled fist.

“Yeah?”

“Well. . . she said. . . you know. . . it looks like my number’s up.” I glanced around my apartment in Athens, Georgia. An overstuffed and stained sofa sat against the far wall, framed by two wooden end tables, each topped with lamps sporting large umbrella-shaped shades. I found myself in a probationary summer quarter of law school at the University of Georgia. I hoped against hope that I would do well enough to get accepted as a regular student in the upcoming fall quarter.

Dad’s friends, nicknamed him “Lightning” when he was growing up because of his v e r y slow drawl. Now he drew out a question to the point that made me want to scream: “What do you think you’ll do about it?”

This wasn’t the way I envisioned the conversation going. No way. He was a prominent south Georgia lawyer. My grandfather was a federal court judge for the middle district of Georgia. Both had connections up the political chain all the way to Sam Nunn, senator from the great state of Georgia and the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee. For God’s sake. I expected him to say something like, “Give me a couple of days to look into this.” Then things would be okay, and I would be exempt from the big green Army Machine.

“Well, I don’t know. . . Looks like I might. . . You know. . . Have to go in. And, of course, I’ll be in Vietnam before long.”

“Uh huh,” came the distant reply.

In the summer of 1968, things weren’t looking very good over there. During that year’s Tet Offensive, we lost over 500 Americans, with some 2500 more wounded in just seven days. All together that year we would lose over 16,500 souls. The fact that the enemy was well on its way to losing over 200,000 didn’t do much for the hope that I would make it back in one piece, if at all.

I continued, “Well, I looked into the National Guard, but the recruiter told me that they were full up now. Maybe in a month or two an opening would come up. . . and. . . you know. . . I might be able to get in. But I don’t have a few months.” Okay, for sure. Now I expected to hear him say, “Let me give Sam a call and see what he says.” But noooooooooo.

“Looks like you don’t have much of a choice then,” Dad said instead.

I decided to give him one more chance to pull my fat out of the fire as he had always done in the past. “What do you think I should do? You know. . . About this.”

“I think you should be careful and write home often.”

Well, Hell!

YEARS LATER, MOTHER told me that Dad didn’t sleep completely though a single night the entire

year I spent in Vietnam. He came from that generation, the Greatest Generation, that saw service to your country as a sacred honor and one to be taken on with pride and distinction. I think today that if something happened to my son, daughter, or one of my grandchildren, I truly believe that life would not be worth living. I don't know if I could have done what Dad did. I would hope I could, but I also hope I don't ever have the opportunity to find out.

I DECIDED THAT I would join rather than get drafted. After all, I could get a delayed entry of three months if I joined, and every day I stalled put another day between me and my visit to that tropical paradise. So that's what I did. The Reluctant Warrior climbed into the bus and bounced his way to the induction station in Atlanta, Georgia, for testing and an enlistment physical.

Unloading from the bus at the reception station, I shouldered my way into the large building that would be my home for two days of prodding and probing and test-taking. I had decided that I would apply for Officers' Candidate School (OCS). After all, that could delay my visit to Vietnam another six months!

Two questions on the general knowledge test gave me my first indication that I might actually be embarking on something that I might just make my niche in life: "How do you pour beer into a glass and not form a head?" and "How many balls are there on a pool table?" I kid you not!

AND SO BEGAN, dear reader, my thirty-one year (and, at first, reluctant) march from Private to Colonel—a march filled with joy and tears, happiness and sorrow, success and failure, comfort and hardship. If nothing else, it would prove to be interesting with Polly in lock step by my side. As you march with me through the following pages, my hope is that you'll find it the same.

When my march ended, I could look back and say that, for most part, it was the most fun I ever had with my clothes on.