

CAPTAIN FOR DARK MORNINGS

S H A D M E S H A D



Hidden Struggles Behind the Vietnam War

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First Hardcover Edition 1982

First Softcover Edition May 1994

Second Hardcover Edition 2023

For all Vietnam Veterans

*"The secret of happiness is freedom, and the secret of freedom is a brave heart."
Thucydides*

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1. 'NAM

We landed before dawn. Coming in over Cam Ranh Bay we could see lights flashing from some distant fight. I was almost ecstatic at the sight of it. Anxious about what would happen, but up for it.

Vietnam was waiting for me. It had been waiting for five years. I went in January 1970, and by then I had enough misgivings about fighting that war that I transferred from the Infantry to the Medical Services Corps. I was a psych officer, regardless. There was a war going on. My generation was fighting it. I was not going to miss it.

We rode out the last few minutes of our safety, all three hundred of us in our dress greens, tense and expectant, outwardly calm. Having seen the firefighting from the air, I half expected to be handed a rifle and have to come out shooting.

We grabbed our gear and lined up. The doors opened with a hiss and we were there. The steam, noise, and smell of Vietnam rushed in at us.

The odor, a mixture of jet fuel, night humidity, and war, was unique and overwhelming. The heat just hung on you. Between that and the anxiety everyone was feeling, dark blotches of sweat began forming on our uniforms. We got off and headed for the Jeeps and buses that took us to the large aluminum terminal.

There we were, carrying our duffle bags, filing into the main terminal to be briefed, sitting down in uncomfortable little plastic chairs. We were the only ones in stateside uniforms. Everyone else was in faded, rough combat fatigues. We looked like the bunch of virgins we were.

The room was huge and divided by concertina wire: virgins on one side, troops headed for home on the other. The troops on the other side of the wire looked stoned. They were moving in slow motion, as if in a trance. Every now and then one would come toward the wire, cigarette in his mouth, look at us and go back to the line. Ghostlike. We stole quick glances at them. They stared at us.

When the time came for them to board the plane, the doors opened and they simply filed out to the Freedom Bird, the same plane we had just vacated. Not one of them looked back. I waited for someone to turn around and take one last look. Not one did.

A colonel approached the stage and talked into the mic in the monotone of one who has given the same speech over and over. Our welcome.

We were pretty much still in shock; the confusion, the smell, sweat running down into our socks. Your whole body was sensitive to all this. It was hard to focus on anything.

“As you look around you—to your left, to your right, in front of you, behind you—it is highly likely that one of these persons will either come back in part, or not at all. One year from today. It could be you.”

Words to this effect: Do your job. Be careful. Do your assignment. Obey orders. When he reached the part about praying we would fly out of the airport with our minds and bodies intact, almost on cue, the Freedom Bird fired its jets and taxied away.

Eventually we loaded onto the buses, officers on one, enlisted men on the others, to head for further processing. Two escort Jeeps with M-60's mounted on them preceded us. I sat next to a lieutenant from West Point who had just finished his jungle training. He was as wired as I was. We sat there, wondering aloud.

Suddenly everything lit up. Trip flares had gone off. We hit the floor as the firing started. It was over in a few seconds. It was, we found out later, a sapper attack. A VC, satchel charges strapped to his body, had broken through the perimeter and tried to hit the buses. He had managed to spray the lead bus with a few rounds before he hit the trip flares. There was a flood of light, and he was wasted in seconds.

Meanwhile we just lay there. Through my fear, all I was capable of thinking, was, "God, don't let me get killed in my dress greens. Not that. Not even in combat. Not even the base. Not even, for God's sake, processed in.

The next few days were spent going from class to class getting a crash course on Vietnam. The real crash course was outside the classroom. We'd sit in the USO and enlisted men's clubs listening to Korean rock bands pound away, while mortars pounded away in the distance. The sound of mortars and machine guns ten miles away was a constant backdrop.

Everyone kept goofy to stay loose—talk of R & R six months away, start making plans, laugh, do anything but talk of death. I started a letter to Shirley, my girlfriend. I had little to say about Vietnam. R & R was on my mind. Would we meet in Japan or Hawaii? I was excited, though full of vague emotions. I'd even write poems for Shirley. I never did things like that.

Cam Ranh was essentially a waiting compound. I spent my first few days there. After a short hop to Long Binh to get my assignment, I hung around again, waiting to get up to Danang.

We weren't allowed to leave the base. We could go to the PXs and Korean shops on the base while we got used to fatigues, trying to fade them from bright green. We slept and listened to helicopter pilots or grunts in transit—anyone who'd been there awhile who could tell us what it was like on the other side of the fence.

The chopper pilots who flew the gunships carried cards saying, “Have Ship Will Kill,” “Have Gun Will Travel.” They looked different from the other troops, their fatigues faded brown from dust, heat, and sun.

They’d look at us in our bright virgin greens and tell us stories. You never knew what was true and what was not, but you knew these John Waynes had been out there.

I’d spend a couple of hours listening to them, take a couple showers, and try to sleep. When I slept, I’d dream I was back in the States, then wake up disoriented and a little nervous. I started doing pushups and sit-ups. I hadn’t trained for a couple of weeks. It was important to me to keep in shape—it has always been important to me—and I had begun thinking I’d melt away to one hundred pounds if I didn’t get busy.

All the while, people were coming and leaving Cam Ranh Bay. That was a source of trouble—you came and left alone, not with your unit. No chance for esprit de corps to develop in Nam; nothing to hang on to when you reentered the States.

I’d get to know someone a little and the next thing I knew there’d be a note on my bed, “Hey, Shad. It was nice meeting you. They’re sending me to Phu Bai. Best of luck. Hope you have a great year.”

A great year.

After a few days I boarded a C-130 transport, a huge empty boxcar of a plane, and went down to Long Binh to get my assignment from Colonel Mackey. He handled the mental health assignments. I was about to find out what a psych officer did in a war.

Psych officer. Sorry about that, Connally. This was not how Sergeant Connally wanted me to go to war. He had been in Nam. Special Forces. He had wanted me to be one of them. Search and destroy. In Connally’s Basic Guerilla Warfare Training and Counter Guerilla

Insurgency in ROTC at Spring Hill College, I was gung-ho—in the safety of that Jesuit school in Mobile, Alabama.

Connally had told me I was one of the few who could make it in Nam, one of the few who stood a rat's ass chance of making it back.

I was a survivor thanks to Coach Thomas. All I knew about survival I owed to him. He'd been my high school football coach. That was no football field he ruled over in Birmingham; it was an arena for gladiators.

I was a gladiator. I barely cleared five feet five inches and I weighed about 130lbs. A skinny little kid with bushy eyebrows. He called me Cricket and had me playing quarterback. I did not grow much, but my toughness did. I became addicted to being strong – in every sense of the word. I had to prove it. I couldn't stay away from a challenge.

Bull in the ring. That was how Thomas had taught us survival. Put one of us in a circle, ring half the team around, give out numbers and call them out. Attack. Go for the bull. It was hard to stay up for long, but I was quick, and it paid off.

He'd send me out against a defensive lineman. It didn't matter how big the son-of-a-bitch was, he'd tell me. I was a bullet for a 45.

"Goddarnit, boy. Field goal his nuts."

I was that bullet. I did not like to lose. That is what Sergeant Connally had seen in ROTC.

But that had been in 1966. What now?

I had never let Connally know how his search and destroy slide shows (pictures of Viet Cong being blown to bits) had affected me. It scared me—that we'd be able to do something like that.

It took my friend Thom Cooney, however, to make me see it was not for me. Now called Thom Cooney Crawford, he was an artist and conscientious objector. He took me to the Expo '67 in Montreal where he sat me down with the draft dodgers, rapped with me, and made me ask myself the questions about this war I had never asked. I had watched it on television. Something was different, I could see, but all I asked was why we didn't just go in there and kick ass. I had pretty much left it all fuzzy. Thom made me focus.

"What do you know about these people, Shad? Ninety-nine percent of them are farmers I hear. I wonder what the fight's about."

Me, too.

With Thom's provocation and the MSW in correctional social work I had just received from Florida State University, I decided to transfer from infantry to medical service in 1968. At my request I headed for the U.S. Disciplinary Barracks at Fort Leavenworth in January 1969.

Almost half of the prisoners were there for drug violations. Many of them were from Vietnam—soldiers, grunts, doing time for weed, heavy drugs, and murder.

And then there was the Hole. A dungeon under the prison, cold and damp in winter; hot and humid in summer. They kept the animals down there. Medical service personnel were not allowed. A psychiatrist took me down there. After that, I couldn't stay away.

Most of the men down there were minorities, and most of them from Vietnam. Assault, murder, fragging, drug busts—all requiring discipline. Flipped out and sitting out their lives under the ground.

I started a group. Getting them to talk, getting them to want out of the Hole, getting them out—impossible. Except that I did it.

Being black and in that war where there were too many black grunts being thrown away on needless missions, where rank went to whites, not blacks—that kind of rage made them crazy and put them in the Hole.

Something was very wrong. Talking with the inmates convinced me to go to Vietnam. I had to go look. I did not understand it, but I was ready to look for my own understanding of it. I could have gotten out of it easily. My tour was almost up. It was up to me, my officers told me.

I took a gamble. Going in as a psych officer—with my talent and luck? Shit. Survival was no problem. I always survived. Vietnam was just one more test.

Before leaving for Vietnam, I went through medic's training in Texas and one week of Preparation for Overseas Reassignment at Fort Riley, Kansas. The purpose for bringing us to that frozen outpost in the middle of the snow belt was to remind us how to survive in a jungle war. A real FTA – Fuck the Army. What rage I already had at military brass and regulations was fanned there to a tropical heat.

I left for Vietnam feeling that I was the champion of grunts and common sense. Those are not necessarily useful feelings to have in the army. They have stayed with me. Vietnam only intensified them. And so, perhaps even more so, did coming home and working within the system for the Veterans Administration. There are times, I'm sure, when I've worn that rage, and that loyalty to the grunts, like a chip on my shoulder. Acting out. They went much deeper, however. If my feelings have gotten me into trouble with the Army, and with the Veterans Administration—and they have—they have also sustained me.

I left anyhow. Fuck the Army. Screw the world. Captain Floyd "Shad" Meshad was on a Flying Tiger headed for Vietnam. That was still my mood a few days after my arrival when I showed up in Long Binh for my assignment.

Long Binh looked like a stateside base. Quonset after air-conditioned Quonset, it was removed from the war. There was a job open there, Colonel Mackey told me, at the Long Binh jail. That was the last thing I wanted. I couldn't see how it would differ from my year at Leavenworth. The job open in I Corps would be different.

They were looking for someone, Mackey said, to go to the 95th Evac (Evacuation) Hospital in Danang and help, maybe even replace, the psychiatrist up there, Major Mizner. He was keeping too many men out of the field; he had a personality conflict with the commanding officer who was going to eat him alive. Mizner was a wimp. They needed someone with leadership ability.

Danang was fifty miles south of the DMZ, far from headquarters, far from Mickey Mouse. There were seventy thousand of the First and Fifth Mechanized Infantry troops in I Corps, plus some Marines we'd be responsible for. And one psych unit: Mizner, me, if I went, and a couple of psych techs. Seventy thousand troops do not get help in a combat zone, Mackey told me. You saw as many as you could. It was an impossible job. Round the clock. Seven days a week. It might be kind of exciting, he said.

It was for me. I was on my way.

