

Red, Black and Blue
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Chapter 1. Boot Camp

Awoken by a garbage can crashing, banging, and rolling between the cots, my scramble out of the bunk causes the picture of my family to fall onto the cot below.

“Here, Howard.” Richard, my Navy boot camp bunk buddy remarks as he hands me back the photo. “You all look like the Jackson Five.”

“Miss my ‘fro.” I run my palm over my shaven head.

He shows me his high school photo album page, “My Beatle bangs.” I don’t see any non-whites.

I shower, and don my U.S. Navy dungaree enlisted uniform, each item having been carefully folded and stowed as instructed by the Drill Sargent. We line up outside. Cone-shaped light beams down from the rows of streetlamps on the marching field pavement penetrating the pre-dawn fog. The thick blanket testifies to the hot day forecast for this boot camp located in tropical Central Florida. The insects chirp out a rhythm sounding primeval. More felt than seen, the faint profiles of hundreds of young men aligned in columns, each wearing the same enlisted uniform and cap, appear as rows of tombstones silhouetted by the street lamps. Standing close to each other with not a word or a whisper audible, they stand at parade rest.

Appointed Platoon command, I lead my troop to join the others. The sound of us marching resounds in the humid air. Each step reverberates in synch. I sing a soulful, timing tune, “Your left, your right, your left, your right, your left, your left. You left your ma; you left your pa, you left that girl you never had, you left, you left.”

The blue of first light starts to brighten the marching field, as we, like a freight train rolling into a rail yard with trains on all lines, align between the other companies.

“Company prepare to halt.” I call out and then three steps later, “Halt.”

My company snaps to a stop with the precision of a professional marching band.

However, they have not halted at attention in the normal upright position but stand frozen in the half-swing of the soulful, comic way in which we were marching. I hear laughter from the other rows of newbie recruits.

“Company, right face.”

Instead of the usual spin of the entire body, my command turns their heads in a precision snap to the right. Chuckling breaks the discipline of silence in the other ranks. My squad, still frozen in the half-step marching position, hear me order, “Company, forward face.” They spin back their heads to looking forward. “Company prepare to march in reverse.” A new burst of giggles from the troops, as I call out, “Company, reverse march.”

In the crouched position they halted in, the young men start marching in reverse looking very much again as a train, this time chugging back. They go back a few yards in perfect step, until I order, “Company, halt.”

We stop. “Company, forward march.”

They chug forward again. “Company, prepare to halt.”

“Halt.”

They slam to a stop. The other columns remain silent for some reason.

Under a streetlight, I call out, “Company, attention.”

Snapping to attention in the normal standing position, I order, “Company, right face.”

I spin to a right face. My nose lands just inches away from the Navy Drill Instructor’s nose. His stern face growls.

I struggle to stay cool, “Company, parade rest.”

The seamen snap to parade rest, as do I, still just inches in front of the angry man. The ranking Chief Petty Officer questions, “So you think you’re funny, eh?”

“... ah, yes sir?” I say.

“Well, let’s see if I can wipe your smile off you.”

I glance over at Richard, who holds second in command of the unit. He grimaces.

The instructor takes charge. “Attention.” The troops snaps into position. “Now, beginning with the last man and moving up the column, I want to hear every general order. If one of you screws up, the whole company runs. Understood?”

In unison, they respond. “Yes, sir.”

“Begin.”

One by one we repeat a general order. The Chief gets distracted by the other units moving into the chow hall and backs off a bit as he checks off roll call on his clipboard, but still where he can keep an eye and ear alert for any screw-up. Richard whispers to me, “I’ll never get it right, Howard.”

“Just move your lips. I’ll do the rest.”

“What’da ya, mean?”

The guy next to Richard delivers a general order.

“Trust me. Just move your lips.”

Richard’s turn. He panics, but, opens his mouth. I project my voice and read off the order; my voice sounds as if coming from Richard.

The drill instructor does look but he sees Richard’s lips moving and the sound emitting from him, so he looks away. The other units have all moved into the chow hall.

I keep my lips as tightly closed as possible, afraid the slightest movement will betray me.

After Richard's order, I call out my own.

The Chief, disappointed that he didn't catch us screwing up, retorts, "You're all lucky. Now get in the chow line and get back out here in thirty minutes, or I'll get a run out of you yet."

We move into to the chow hall and press ass to elbow in the doorway. "You saved me, Howard. How did you do it?" Richard asks.

"Ventriloquism. My father taught me."

"That's a great talent for getting out of the trouble."

"Yeah, it's gotten me in and out of a lot of jams. What's your specialty?"

"Medical corpsman."

"Me, too. Maybe we'll deploy to 'Nam together."

"That'd be great. Maybe we could form a buddy system and get each other through the war."

"Great, man. I'll be there for you."

"And I'll cover your butt."

"They can't get to us if we stick together."

"Yeah, we'll show 'em. We'll come back. I know it."

"Okay, buddy."

Our line moves in as the red sun rises out of the eastern tropical sky.

Chapter 2. The Same Sun rises

The sun sets over the hills and rice patties of my village in the Central Coastal zone of Vietnam. My mother calls out to me, "Lin, the Catholic mission bells call us to mass." We hurry out of the rice fields, "Yes, mother pray for a safe night." Last night dangerous elements moved about in the dark. My mother replies as we past The Buddhist huts and alters where we smell

incense burning and hear prayer chants, “Yes, Lin we must pray for peace.” The insects in the brush chirp, and the birds settle and tweet; “here I am, now, I am here, now I am there, I am settled.” I tell her, “The birds will sound the first alarm if danger approaches.” Soon some of the village men, will don their ‘black pajamas’ and move out with a quiet skill of the tiger.

After mass we attend school, lingering for a moment to watch the sunset, I speak to my female nun/teacher, “un beau coucher de soleil.” I speak French whenever I can and train myself to think in the language as well. Our priest and nuns, Vietnamese, attended catholic seminaries in France during the Japanese occupation. She replies in English as she knows I am trying to learn English as well. “Yes, a beautiful sunset.” She responds, “In Paris it would be almost noon.” We move inside the small thatched hut mission and I inquire, “And, in the United States?” She knows of my fascination with America.” “The same sun that sets in the east, raises in the West.” She smiles and replies in a mix of English and Vietnamese, “Yes, Lin, chúng ta sống dưới một Thiên Chúa.”

Our class includes math, science, religious and political studies. Our parish priest talks to us about politics, “The benefits of living under the South Vietnamese government assures freedom of religion, property ownership, and the benefits of the free market.”

A boy in the class challenges, “The Viet Cong teach their followers the collective state provides for all.”

The priest replies, “The collective state suppresses individual initiative, you are forced to work as opposed to enjoying the fruits of your labor.”

“The South takes the majority our fruits of labor as taxes! And spends it on luxury lives in Saigon.”

“You have the power to elect representatives to change the tax laws and fight for

distribution of collected monies.”

“Our electives are corrupt and take money from Foreign powers, like the U.S.”

“The Western powers should not be viewed as enemies of the Vietnamese, but, as willing partners in protecting our freedoms and prosperity.”

After our classes, we pair up with our friends and walk to our huts. I walk with my best friend, Sun, and ask her, “Remember just a few years ago, all of us kids would play hide and seek on the way home?” She says, “Yes. Too dangerous for us now.” I reply, “Sad. We had a lot of good times.” She recalls, “We all played together, Catholic, Buddhist, boys, and girls.” I remark, “Now we walk in pairs, quietly and quickly to our homes.”

We pass again through the Buddhist sector. In shelters large enough to hold many people, we can hear the Viet Cong telling their followers of the joys of communism, the stories of Ancient Vietnam folklore warning of the dangers of foreigners, and Western thought. The tell of the great man, “Uncle Ho” who lived in Paris, and Moscow and learned the value of communism. He now leads the North Vietnamese fighting for the South’s liberation. By fighting with Uncle Ho, the South can once again be free of the foreign devils and return to our traditional values of communal living. Sun and I walk without talking until we near our homes.

“Good night, Sun, ‘bạn có thể sống một ngàn năm.’”

“Good night, Lin. ‘May you live a thousand years.’”

“Mu Mu, stay down!” My dog jumps up on me getting his muddy feet all over my school outfit. I try to swat him, but he sprints off, barking. “Je, Je. No!” I feel my pig’s wet nose on the back of my knee. Mobbed by chickens, rabbits and other pets and livestock, I make it to the doorway. “Mùi tuyệt vời.” The wonderful smell of mud fish stew, shrimp, and rice with herbs mixed with vegetables, makes me weak from hunger. “Chào mừng về nhà.” My mother

welcomes me home.

“Lin’s home.” My brother announces as my grandmother pours me a cup of tea. “Did you pray for me at mass today? My little ‘berry?’ Lin Ching says as she stands and sips her tea as sitting in the low chair proves too painful. My father, greets me, “How’s my sweet daughter?” and one of my brother’s says, “Moc Tran asked about you today.” My sister giggles and signals for him to hush. My younger brother starts with, “Moc loves Lin, Lin love Moc, and helps arrange the table. I would hit him, but my hands are full of food dishes. My mother snaps him on the head, and orders, “Everyone sit, please, the food is hot and I don’t want to eat it cold.” I the place the food and make grandmother a plate.

My father worries, “The South Vietnamese army is conscripting Catholic boys, I hear they are sending recruiters here.”

My mother says, “Our boys are needed on the farm, we cannot survive without them.”

My brother pipes in, “I heard they take the oldest and leave the youngest, that would mean I will have to go.”

I can’t help tearing up, “You smart you can go in as officer, not have to fight and die.”

My younger brother says, “I will go. I want to kill the Viet Cong.”

“Shh ... shh ...,” we women rush to close the windows and doors.

The older brother adds, “Many of our Buddhist neighbor’s sons have left to be trained in the North. They will soon return here to fight the Americans.”

“My father informs us, “The families in this village are trying to find ways to keep their sons at home, we have received many dowry offerings for Lin in marriage. Yesterday, Moc Tron’s father offered two cows for you to marry his son.”

“Two cows is a lot, Father, but, I wish to move to Saigon and marry into an educated

man, my skills in speaking French and English offers many opportunities.”

My mother adds, “Lin could go and stay with my Uncle. He works at the old French Hospital with the Americans.”

My father jokes, “We could use two cows, but we want Lin to be happy and prosper.”

My mother says, “I will contact him.”

Our conversation returns to the concerns of my brothers.

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The South Vietnamese Army sets up a recruiting station my town square. My brothers and the other Catholic young men and their families stand in line to sign up. My family, like most of the village parents, stand close by, and socialize. South Vietnam and U.S. flags fly. Brand new American military helicopters fly low overhead dropping pamphlets. A couple military tanks, armored vehicles, and armaments display. Propagandist speak from podiums, “Join the struggle to keep South Vietnam free from Soviet and Chinese communist.” “Protect your right to own property.” “Receive good pay, bonuses offered.” “Save your right to be Catholic.” “Send money home to help your families.”

A loud whistle whining sound followed by white smoke zooms overhead and explodes. The Viet Cong attack. Rocket missiles zing in with all the sound and sparkle of fireworks. Explosions, fires, and debris fill the sky with terror. Machine gun burst from the nearby trees rake the structures. People are shredded, run on fire, choke on smoke, and fall among the panicked crowd. I turn to grab my sister; she is on fire. I roll her to the ground. People stomp on top of us, tripping over us in the smoke and chaos. I can’t see anything, but feet and falling bodies and body parts. My dog finds me and tries to save us, he is whining and growling. He pulls at my wrist. I stand up and pull my sister into my arms. I can’t tell if she is alive or not. I tie

a scrap of dress around the dog's neck and let him lead me out of the fray.

The South Vietnamese soldiers respond, and a full-on fire fight breaks out in the village. Tanks come to life and blast the tree lines. Missiles and mortar shells bombard all around. The village burns down. We make it home, or what is left of it. The pig and chickens are dead or scattered. My grandmother's body lies under the dining room table, most of the house is gone and smoldering. I lay my sister down on the table over top of grandma. My sister is dead, my only choice is to go live with my Uncle in the city.

Chapter 3. Love is in the air

“Good morning, Howard.” Richard greets me in the morning, mimicking the DJ on the Military radio who always starts his show with, “Good Morning, Vietnam.”

“Mornin’ Richard, what’s good about it?”

“Lin’s here, that always seems to make you happy.” He teases me.

Pause.

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